

## cataclysm

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# cataclysm

by [thanotaphobia \(blue000jay\)](#)

## Summary

The story does not truly start here.

No fairytales ever do— no, stories like these often begin in simpler places. Simpler stories, ones that belong to the people and not the kings. Stories that are told around campfires, told around the butter churn and whispered around hearths. Stories told to children as they're tucked into bed, gentle warm hands soothing their brows and speaking with low tones as they relay the stories of grandeur and magic. Fairytales are often piled upon— one magic spell becomes two. A mother changes the prince's name to her own dear son. Tommy was once told stories like these.

(or, the high-fantasy royalty AU starring Tommyinnit as one child king, the Empire as his opponent, and *so many politics*.)

## Notes

spawned off [this tweet](#) many many months ago, when it took on a life of it's own.

big thanks to [pointvee](#) for being my lovely beta on this fic!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# arc I. - the greatest glory is not in never falling

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The dais is cold under his feet, the throne behind him toppled over with the force of the fight.

In front of him are two men— one tall, pink hair tied up neatly on the back of his head, helmet under his arm. The other bears a crown, covered in glittering stones that are surely priceless. They're both wearing armor, stained red with the blood of good men, and Tommy seethes in his position.

“Lay your weapons down,” he demands, voice shaky and echoing in the hall. Around them are bodies—guards he once knew by name each, now only smears on the floor at the feet of gods.

*Not gods*, he reminds himself, staring the emperor of the Antarctic Empire in the eyes. *Just men. Men that can be defeated.*

“He’s so young,” says the pink-haired man, the one and only General Technoblade. Tommy’s seen him once or twice in person, when he was very very little. Only in picture books since then. He’s not addressing Tommy—his head is turned to the side, gaze flicking onto the emperor and a wry expression on his face. “When they said boy king, I didn’t think they’d mean infant.”

“I am not an infant,” Tommy hisses out, fists clenching at his sides. He has the urge to stalk out and punch the man as hard as he possibly can, so much anger brewing in his gut, but by the gods, they have swords and he does not. “I am King Thomas, and you must lay your weapons down—”

“Your men have abandoned you,” General Technoblade says, snapping his eyes back at Tommy and making him stiffen in surprise. His irises are red, terrifyingly so. “Your advisors are gone or dead, the guards slaughtered or captured. You stand alone in front of a tipped-over throne and bearing no crown. You are not the king of anything.”

“I am king,” Tommy insists, because he is, because he inherited this kingdom as a baby and he has grown up here and he has loved here and Dream had told him many times, every night of his life that *this* is his birthright. “This is my kingdom and you will lay your weapons down.”

General Technoblade hefts his sword higher with one hand, fingers gripping the hilt despite the slick blood staining the leather. “You are in no place to make demands, child—”

“Techno,” the emperor murmurs, voice echoing out among the high quartz arches, the hall that Tommy has played in and governed in for fourteen years. Where Dream had brought him food over late-night strategy meetings and Sapnap had shown him how to cast a fire rune and George had tended to the plants lining the rim of the room. All the plants are dead now, Tommy notes. Wonderful. The emperor reaches out, placing a hand onto the general’s arm and lowering it with a gentle nudge, a careful push. “Enough. We’ve won. He knows that.”

“I am King Thomas,” Tommy says again, eyes darting around the room. The plants are dead. The banners are ripped, and the men lie dead at his feet. Dream is nowhere in sight. Sapnap is gone, George is—somewhere. His castle is being overrun and he is stuck here in the epicenter. This is the eye of his storm, staring down an emperor who has caused him so much stress in the past five years. His voice pitches high. “I am king, and you will lay your weapons down—”

He is not crying. He’s a monarch.

“Techno,” the emperor is saying again, “he’s a child—”

“He’s a monster–”

“That’s what they said about you, too–”

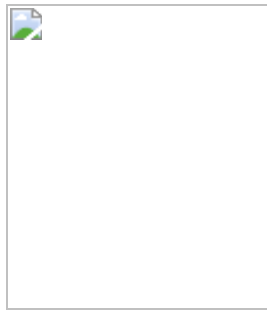
Voices, floating over his head and discussing him in a tone that means he should be paying attention, but it’s very hard to do so when he’s sucking in breath after breath of panicky air and shuddering through something akin to the Red Cough, a respiratory sickness that had ravaged their kingdom when Tommy was six. It takes a moment but he manages to center himself, catch his breath, hold back any remaining tears. (He’s already spilt plenty.)

Emperor Philza Minecraft Watson is staring him down from across the room, blue eyes as cold as the ice that comes from his kingdom. Calculating, evaluating. Tommy is brutally alone at the pinpoint of his gaze, and he feels it in his very soul.

“The city has been taken,” the emperor says, not without kindness. “The castle is breached, and the throne room half destroyed. You have two choices here, my young lord. Surrender and come peacefully, or die on your overturned throne.”

Tommy is a king. He was raised to lead, and he does it well. He knows he does. There’s evidence of it in the lands surrounding his capital, in the happiness of his citizens, in the proud gleam of Dream’s eyes. But he’s also a child afraid to die.

He goes willingly in the end, hands out and palms up, and the kingdom of the Opus Isle falls.



The story does not truly start there.

No fairytales ever do– no, stories like these often begin in simpler places. Simpler stories, ones that belong to the people and not the kings. Stories that are told around campfires, told around the butter churn and whispered around hearths. Stories told to children as they’re tucked into bed, gentle warm hands soothing their brows and speaking with low tones as they relay the stories of grandeur and magic. Fairytales are often piled upon– one magic spell becomes two. A mother changes the prince’s name to her own dear son. Tommy was once told stories like these.

He can remember long, sleepless nights when he was little. Nights when the stars would drag on forever, when the moon hung in the sky past it’s welcome. He’d crawl out of bed then, feet cool on the marble floors of his home. Most of all he can remember the curtains; they were great tall shimmering things made of fairy-wing gossamer, and they would billow in the nighttime breeze as he padded his way down the hall and to another room. A room with a shining golden handle and carved oak doors to match his own, the moonlight gleaming

against the floors and walls. Sometimes, the light had been enough to see by. Others, Tommy would light a candle and let that guide his way.

The door would creak open. He'd slip inside, latching it shut once more, and then make his way to the bed across the room. When the monsoon seasons were around, he'd make sure the windows were shut tight and then crawl into bed. Like clockwork, the sheets would be lifted and Tommy tucked under a warm arm.

"Tell me a story," he'd plead, and Dream would sigh, and begin a tale.

There were repeats. Of course there were— for all the stories Dream came up with or knew, Tommy came searching for double or triple that. But they all often played out in a similar tune.

A bad man would come and take something from the hero. Sometimes the hero was a lost princess, or a man taking his cabbages to market, or a soldier who's loved ones were slaughtered. Sometimes the hero was a young king. Sometimes, the hero shared Tommy's own name. Dream's voice would be husky from sleep and yet he'd still whisper his way through a plot, describing in detail the golden blond of the princess' hair or the way the cabbages rolled off the man's cart and into the mud. Though the cast of characters changed, each story played out the same: the hero would face a challenge, and then fight back against their villain. Victory was always on the side of the beloved protagonist— little Tommy would cheer and hush himself at Dream's insistence, eyes wide in the dark and curled up under sinfully soft sheets. The heroes always won, even if the journey there had been difficult.

He's choosing to believe his story has only just begun. There is no way his story ends now— not when a villain has just come and swept his whole world out from under his feet.

The horse beneath him clips across the square, footsteps uneven, and Tommy nearly pitches right off the side. He probably wouldn't even complain if he did— considering his hands are tied together at the moment, it's not exactly his fault that he can't hold on as they ride. He can try, fingers grasping at the reins as though his horse is not being led by the one in front of him. He can see the back of the emperor's head— golden hair, helmet still tucked away. It's so easy to imagine an arrow notched in a bow, imagine his shot being straight and true. The red that would spill from the wound. Just as red as Tommy's blood, as the lifeline keeping them all together and human. There's a cut on his forearm, the edges of his shirt stained red and a wound clogged with dried blood and sweat. It probably needs to be tended to, but he's a little busy being kidnapped and escorted out of his own kingdom at the moment. He tears his eyes away from the spot on his arm and looks around.

Caterwaul is a brilliant city. Limestone from the southern quarries built it up long ago, back in days that Tommy has only read about. The streets are cobbled and worn, a system of sewers and waterways connecting the entire stretch of city. Houses lean against each other, some of them stacked like blocks, others stretching long and low. Tommy has poured over maps of this city ever since he was a baby, studying the lines of its architecture and tracing chubby fingers along the creases of its livelihood.

Normally, the streets would bustle with people. Markets would stretch down long streets, people flitting this way and that. Stalls with their colorful banners and tents dyed with every

shade you could think of. Businesses would run, children would laugh, and the streets would be filled with the sounds of life going on. Tommy is nostalgic for it now— now, when the air is cold and stale, when the only sounds are those of shutters pulling inwards, or the march of men on foot as they go door-to-door and pronounce the city as fallen.

Caterwaul is anything but fallen, Tommy thinks stubbornly as he glances around. He catches the glimpse of small hands on a windowsill before they're snatched away and a curtain drawn over the hole. It has simply receded— a turtle pulling its head into its shell, where the air is warm and safe and there is no need to worry about the chill that soldiers and kings bring with them.

The flags of the Antarctic Empire are everywhere. Cobalt blue with a shining chrysanthemum plastered in the middle, proudly displayed over every street corner. Soldiers in fatigues meant for colder winters up north crowd around them, mostly celebrating amongst themselves as they gather. Occasionally, they pass a pile of corpses being loaded onto wagons. The bodies are mostly golden— Tommy forces himself to stare as they pass by. Those are his people they slaughtered, he reminds himself. Dream's voice echoes— *and it is your fault*.

Once and a while, there is a mix of blue against the gold. It's vengeful and awful, but Tommy can't help but be slightly satisfied that *someone* got a good hit against the enemy.

"Your Highness," someone says, and there's the patter of boots on cobble and then a messenger is up by the Emperor's side. Tommy watches. "Most of the city is subdued, save for some holds in the palace's innards. They await your council."

"Tell the lords to meet us at the campsite," the emperor says without hardly a thought. "I need to get some things secured before we have a meeting. Let Sneeg know I want men posted at every third street corner for now— at least two."

"Yes, Your highness," the messenger replies, ducking their head low. Smiling. They're all smiling. At Tommy's misfortune, at the suffering of his world. "Praise saints."

"Prime be with you," the emperor says, and then waves his hand and the messenger disappears into the streets once more. Tommy watches, eyes trailing the stones that make up the interconnected roads of his home.

He's left Caterwaul before. He's gone to the seaside, spent time in other kingdoms, and had delegations in outer-rim towns. But he's never done so as a prisoner. They're approaching the main gate now. He can see the shape of it looming over the tops of buildings in the distance, maybe five or six blocks away. Carvings litter the top and sides of the archway, and Tommy squints in order to see his favorite. A lady, her head bent in prayer, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders as she presses her fists to her shoulders. He can't see her face from this far away, but he knows from a hundred times before what she looks like. Weathered by rainfall, her lips pursed, nose a little cracked. If Tommy really squints, she nearly looks like him.

With care not to fall off his horse, he brings his bound hands firmly up to his chest and mimics her pose. Praying isn't any good in wartime, Dream's told him that a thousand times over.

But...

They've lost now, haven't they?

"Philza," someone says, interrupting his flow of thought. He brings his hands down abruptly—the horse underneath him lurches and he nearly topples off once more onto the dusty roads that still smell faintly of iron. He risks a glance over his shoulder— behind him, General Technoblade's eyes are ahead on the road, or perhaps the chrysanthemum on the back of the emperor's cloak. "The gate. Should we not go around?"

Tommy knows a thousand ways out of this city. He almost offers up a few.

"No," Philza says, not turning to look behind at either of them. "We'll go out the way we came in."

"If you say so." If Tommy had to guess better, the general sounds grumpy. He doesn't bother to tease. He doesn't dare. It takes him a few moments to process why exactly Philza wants them to exit through the main gate.

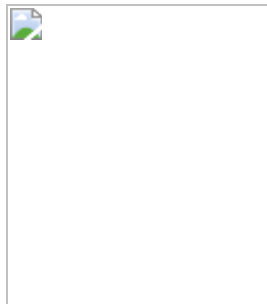
Ahead of them, a crowd of people is gathering. Women, children, any men left in the capitol. The remaining guardsmen from the central palace. Tommy's face burns.

After an eon of silence, he finally speaks up. "Not this," he says quietly as the horses plod onwards. His voice cracks, and he hates it. "Please." Not this shame, his people, looking upon him as he rides away a prisoner.

General Technoblade's voice is steady when he asks: "Would you rather a bag over your head? I'm sure they'd still recognize you from your finery alone. But you wouldn't have to look them in the eyes." It's clear from his tone that he thinks it's a cowardly move— the emperor is scoffing ahead of them, and Tommy's cheeks feel like they're on fire. He's sure his face is bright red, ears even moreso, and ahead of them the people start to turn and look.

"Fuck off," he says quietly, straightening his back a tad, keeping his eyes forward. A bag would be humiliating and worse, claustrophobic. As the horse lurches underneath him and they keep moving forwards, people begin to gasp and whisper. Then louder, they talk. They shout. At one point, things began to be thrown.

Tommy just lifts his head high, fingers clutching the tack until his knuckles go white. He pretends the words he can hear don't sting.





“I will not lie down like a dog,” Tommy spits. The tent around them is lavish. He refuses to look away from the men who brought him inside. He’s exhausted. His knees wobble. General Technoblade is surveying him with a glacial grace, then swoops down to look at him, eye-to-eye.

“Woof.” Technoblade’s face is close enough to his that he can feel the hot breath on his cheeks, his nose, and it makes him scrunch his nose. The insinuation that is being made makes Tommy want to scream in anger. His vision blurs out into red; he doesn’t see the way The Emperor’s face smoothes over in mild irritation behind the General’s head.

“Techno,” the older man says, lilting and easy, hiding his true annoyance. “Don’t antagonize.”

“Why not?” The General turns, sending a glare towards his Majesty that only the inner circle of royalty is allowed to. “He’s killed more of his people than we have. He deserves to feel a bit of shame.”

“Has he not felt enough?” Philza asks, eyes narrowing. The anger in Tommy’s gut is fading a bit, replaced by confusion. “We paraded him out of the city like a prized steed, a war conquest, a prisoner made of gold. That is enough shame to send most men to their knees. He has come to us like a dog to heel—” and then is when Tommy catches the eye of the emperor, the way the light catches the blue and turns the sky into ice— “and that is surely enough for today.”

“I am *not a dog*, ” Tommy reiterates, clutching his fingers behind his back in a desperate effort to keep his hands to himself.

“Hush, pup,” Technoblade says without removing his gaze from the emperor. They seem to have a silent battle, a language Tommy is not fluent in, and he’s forced to wait in simmering rage as the two finally come to an agreement. Technoblade ducks his head— Philza brings his higher, and steps forward as the General moves back.

“Come along,” Philza says, gesturing with one hand. Tommy stays where he is as the emperor brushes past, blue finery coarse against Tommy’s own silks. He still refuses to move, staring ahead at the tent wall like perhaps he can burn a hole through it and run out into the sun. He is not a dog. He is not a dog.

“Child,” the emperor says. He doesn’t touch him— good thing, because Tommy doesn’t trust himself not to bite. But he can feel his presence nonetheless, a hovering giant above his left shoulder, the kiss of air against his skin as someone exists in the space behind his own.

“I am not a child,” Tommy says fiercely. The General laughs, ducking his head down in order to pull his cloak off and drape it across the war table, scattering a few chessboard pieces.

“Techno,” the emperor scolds, then his voice gets louder as he turns his attention back to Tommy. “Thomas. You must be tired, and hungry. You are a prisoner, but an important one, and I will not suffer someone your age to be mistreated under my care. Come along.”

This is a test.

Tommy sticks his feet into the muddy grass mats and refuses to move.

His story, his legacy, is not that of a dog's. He will not heel.

Philza pauses once more, and Tommy watches Technoblade as his eyes track the emperor over his shoulder. After a moment of stalemate, there's a quiet sigh.

"It is either come with me or stay where you are all night, pup," Technoblade says. Tommy wrinkles his nose at the nickname— but still, refuses to move.

"Let him be," Philza says. There's the rustle of tent fabric behind him; senses heightened, he feels like his veins are filled with fire. Prime, he thinks quietly to himself, holding his head high and still, refusing to move, help me get through this.

"I'll stay," Technoblade offers. "Keep an eye on him. Go rest, old man."

"Respect your elders," the emperor shoots back. The simple act of comradeship and familiarity behind them makes Tommy want to shout again. How can they be so casual when he's standing between them, vibrating with anger and disgrace? How can they bicker like old friends when he's right there? It seems wrong, but Tommy isn't in a position to question right now.

The tent rustles, and then the overbearing presence of the emperor is gone and it's just the general and the child king.

Tommy watches as Technoblade stands there for a moment, hands braced on the table and eyes focused on a spot just over his shoulder and then, shifts to Tommy himself. Eyes locked, red versus blue, Tommy watches as the General glances him over and then pushes up off the table.

He braces as the man walks over.

Prepared to take a hit, Tommy finally lowers his head. There's a huff above him— Technoblade towers over him, with the cloak gone it's just his chestplate to see, enchantments humming louder and louder as he approaches.

Contrary to Tommy's expectation, the general doesn't raise a hand against him— or, he does. But as Tommy flinches, the hand coming up doesn't strike. Instead, it rests on top of Tommy's head, a warm weight, fingers sinking into the fluff of his hair. It hits him then— he is no longer wearing his crown.

He can't remember when it came off.

"If you're staying here," the general says, voice low, "then you will stay exactly there. Horses sleep standing. No reason you can't as well."

"I'm not a fucking horse," Tommy says then, a bit of bravery racing through him. "Stop comparing me to animals. Besides, I'm not tired."

He tilts his head up, and above him, the general is smiling.

“Very well then,” he says, and then the hand on Tommy’s head is gone and the general turns, once again turning his back on Tommy. He could fight now— but this is Technoblade, one of the favored warriors of the Blood God, and there’s no way Tommy would be able to run or fight. If he tried— well, he doesn’t want to think about the potential punishment.

“Screw you,” Tommy says quietly, and then a bit louder as his courage seeps back: “Fuck you. I hate you.”

The general glances over his shoulder, one hand hesitating on his cloak as he gathers it up in his hands.

“You’re allowed,” Technoblade says, “to hate us.”

Tommy doesn’t dare step forward and follow him to the table, around the room, even as Technoblade flits around and slips his cloak onto a rack, unclips various weaponry from his hip. It’s only once he’s placed those down does Tommy actually give the tent a once-over, studying the space around him.

For a war room, it’s... comfortable. Rugs litter the floor haphazardly, not entirely covering the beaten-down grass but enough to make it bearable to stand on. The long table stretches out before Tommy, the chessboard pieces of battlefield markers now scattered from where Technoblade had disturbed them. The tent walls are traditional canvas— outside, he can hear the sounds of a camp going about it’s business. An enemy camp, but a camp nonetheless. He can hear horses, smell fires, the strong scent of coffee—

Oh, no. That’s coming from inside the tent, across from him as Technoblade pours himself a drink out of a steaming mug. Tommy’s not a fan of coffee himself— he watches as Technoblade tips his head back and swallows it black, before sitting himself in one of the large wooden chairs and leaning back against its carved head. There’s a book halfway down the table. Technoblade reaches for it, snags it, and then opens it in front of him.

Silence, but for the sound of humanity around them and the shuffle of pages as the Blood God’s warrior reads.

Tommy feels sick to his stomach.

It’s all settling in now, as he stands here and watches one of his most dangerous enemies read a book like he’s on a fucking vacation. Tommy’s home has been cut down by the most merciless of people. His country, his people— he’d failed them. He’d given up, in the end, and now he’s standing here like a servant as he watches his captors gloat. Dream must be coming for me, he thinks, as heavy stones settle in his gut. He must be. There is no other option— Dream got away so he could come back and rescue Tommy when the time was right. He wouldn’t have just left him to the mercy of these monsters, would he? Absolutely not. Tommy steels himself in that resolve. Dream, his friend, his advisor, his brother— he would not have left him.

He has to be steady now, waiting. Patient. The time will come. His stomach roils and the scent of coffee is stronger now, making him want to throw up. He can see the mug Technoblade is holding, dark blue glaze over terra cotta pottery. His vision tunnels.

The time will come.

Tommy's knees buckle, and he is unconscious before he hits the floor.



It's strange, waking up. It happens all at once.

He takes a minute to settle. His chest is still rising and falling slowly, giving the illusion of sleep. Pillows lie soft under his cheek and fingers, and he curls his legs up towards an uneasy stomach and hums to himself, a comfort. They smell like pine and amaranth, not— lavender. Not like normal. His breathing picks up a bit, and then he takes a moment to push himself up. Pillows cascade to the side and something warm and heavy slips off of him— a blanket, crumpling to his waist as he squints and peers around the room.

He's still in a tent. That's good, but also not. Good because he's not in jail, and his hands are no longer tied together. Bad because he's not in the palace, not in the city, and it seems like it's nighttime from what little light he can see beyond the tent walls. Canvas flaps distantly, and there's the crackle of fire. He turns his head and snags the candle that's sitting on a desk nearby, feet silent as he pads onto the ground. His shoes are gone; nowhere to be found when he scours the small area, bare toes poking into the wild grass and dirt that's been tamped down over time.

The siege had taken longer than Tommy had thought possible. Endless days and nights without rest, trying to find a solution that did not end in a defeat. Three of them in a row, with Dream beside him the whole time.

Dream. His chest pains at the very thought of his advisor, his brother. He'd lost him in the battle. He wonders if he's okay, if he's alive. Perhaps another prisoner of war. Tommy knows he's smart enough to avoid traps if he's careful.

Tommy hadn't been smart enough. He'd wandered his way through a deserted palace into a throne room laden with doom. He resists the urge to slap his own head in hindsight. What's done is done— Tommy knows he's got to get out of this damned war camp before morning comes, before someone realizes he's gone. They don't think he's a threat; he's going to take that as an advantage while he can. Because Tommy knows one thing and that is this: if you're alive and breathing, you're a threat. No matter the stature of a person or their mental capabilities, anyone can be dangerous. *Emperor Philza has a lot to learn*, Tommy muses as he sets down the candle he'd picked up in favor of getting on his hands and knees to peer under the cot he'd woken up on. He's still looking for his shoes. *Dumbass*.

There's a murmur of voices outside— Tommy is up in an instant, glancing around the room for anything that could be a weapon. There's not much; this is a bedroom, not the strategy area he'd been in before with the General and Emperor. This isn't a place made for violence and loss, it's just a place to rest.

There are blankets.

Tommy doesn't hesitate. The fabric tears easily under his shaking fingers, picking at threads and seams until the decorative lining rips off in his hands. He wraps it around one hand, staring down at the dark blue of the Empire, and steels his nerve. Ligature is better than nothing.

There. He is no longer unarmed. Something in him settles, creeping to the side of the tent and straining to listen.

“—not a sign,” someone is saying. Tommy bites the inside of his cheek and doesn't breathe. “Not to be brash, your Majesty, but are sure it was smart to take him as-is?”

“Speak freely, Sneeg.” That's the Emperor's voice no doubt. Tired but alert. Tommy hears the ruffle of canvas and the voices grow just the slightest bit clearer. “It's fine. Techno's here, see?”

“Hullo.” The General's voice is lower, less alert. “Sneeg.”

“Techno.”

“How's it been?” Philza asks.

“Kid passed out a few hours ago. Come-down from the stress, I think. He's in the back.”

The Emperor sighs. Tommy grits his teeth. “Poor thing.”

The one they were calling Sneeg before snorts— laughter. Tommy blinks. “He's the enemy, Philza. Not some street orphan for you to pity.”

“He looks the part of street orphan.” Something rattles, and there's the splash of liquid as the smell of coffee becomes the slightest bit stronger. Tommy scans the room around him, especially the walls. There are people in the next room over— the only thing between him and them are some thin, blanket-like fabric walls. He's not going out the front. He scans the ground and where the canvas tent meets the earth, looking for any place that isn't taut. He's small enough— it might be worth it to creep out of the bottom of the tent and just run until someone notices he's missing. There's a bit next to the cot he was sleeping on that seems looser than the rest— Tommy shuffles over, making sure to walk an even heel-to-toe in order to stay silent as a conversation is held in the space six feet to his left. “Thing is as skinny as a bird. I'm sure he's been cooped up in that palace of theirs for ages now.”

“Exactly,” Philza says with a sigh. More rustling— people are sitting down, Tommy thinks, as his fingers scrabble against the canvas and dirt in order to try and get a grip. “It's a bit

unorthodox, but he's what? Fourteen? Born the same year of the Cataclysm, you've heard the rumors. I'm not killing a kid."

"He reminds you of Wil, doesn't he?"

"Shut up, Sneeg." It's a taunt. The voice dubbed Sneeg only laughs in response. "Who's in charge here, again?"

"Sorry, your highness," Sneeg says with another snort-laugh. Tommy scowls. Dumb idiots. Motherfuckers. It may be unbecoming to cuss out people in his head, but it's better than the alternative of doing it aloud. "I'll be sure to watch my tone. Now—" a shift in his voice, the clatter of a mug against wood. "—the city's under control. People are under curfew for now, until we have secured the lockdown. Sunset. The palace has been taken completely. Any dissenters are currently in the palace jail. A few guards, some advisors."

Tommy grits his teeth and pulls on the canvas a bit harder. There's give, but not enough for him to slip out from under it. He trails a hand along the underside of it, searching for the point where a stake drives through, and finally, he's got his hands on it. A solid pull does nothing. Another hardly makes it shift. When he runs a hand alongside the top of the spike, magic sparks at his fingertips and an engraving dips under the pads of his fingers. Dammit.

"Thank you," Philza says with a hum. "We're going to pack up tomorrow, I think."

"So quick to get out of the capital, hm?"

"We need to get up north before the winter freezes over Osprey's lake," Technoblade cuts in, his voice still low and raspy. Tommy grimaces to himself, opening and closing his mouth in an approximate yet mocking version of Technoblade's speech as he keeps talking. "Otherwise we'd be forced to take the northern pass and *that* would take ages."

"...you'll be staying here," Philza says after a moment of silence. Tommy holds his breath, staring stubbornly at the stake still lodged in the ground. He lets out a huff of breath, pushing himself once more to his feet and staggering slightly as the blood rushes to his head. "You, a few others, I'll draft the agreements tonight. Since the young king is coming with us, negotiations can be had properly when we get to Raven's Flight."

Tommy freezes.

He'd put the idea of traveling north out of his mind for the moment— it's too painful for him to want to confront it. He doesn't want to be ripped from his homeland, and yet here he is, in the enemy's tent with a ripped blanket as a weapon to defend himself and eavesdropping on plans to ship him up north. North, to Raven's Flight.

To the Empire's capital city, where all hopes of escape fly out the window as if they were birds themselves.

"Sneeg, you'll be in charge, I think," the emperor is saying, oblivious to Tommy's panic one room over. "Handling things here— keep the camp up with the soldiers, but move a base of

operations to Caterwaul's palace—" And Tommy is spiraling again, as he stands and listens to the emperor instruct one of his men to truly invade the last safe place. His home.

He's so out of it, he doesn't notice that Technoblade has gone quiet. Too quiet. There's a rustle of fabric, and then light pours in as the blanket serving as a doorway is pulled back. Tommy blinks in the sudden rush of lamplight and voices— the blanket in his hand has gone slack, but he's quick to tighten it once more.

"Brat's up," General Technoblade says gruffly. There's a moment where everything is frozen— Tommy, caught in the gaze of the three men like a startled fawn, Philza half out of his seat, Technoblade pushing aside fabric—

And then Tommy's gritting his teeth and taking his chances and bolting. He refuses to be brought north, he refuses to just give up so easily. He books it, toes digging into the soil as he heads left and then feints right— and is pleasantly surprised when the general falls for it. He delights in the surprised expression on the older man, weaving his way to the left and ducking under the blankets and fabrics in a sure-footed manner. This is not the first time Tommy has had to run and duck and weave. Never more has his life depended on it.

The emperor is already at the doorway of the tent, hand thrown out wide to stop him. Behind him, Technoblade is wheeling around on his heels and the other man— Sneeg, now revealed to be some guy with brown hair and it's not important, none of that is important because Tommy is diving beneath the table and bumping his way around chairs and then coming out the other side. Someone's shouting— his name, thrown out into the wind. A candle is knocked over, and a foot stomps out the flames. Tommy whirls around and knocks a coffee mug onto the floor, the contents seeping into the earth as the shards spill out across the mats. Philza is shouting still— Sneeg is as well, and Tommy pays neither of them mind.

He's got the blanket in hand, ripped into a long stretch of gaudy blue. He winds it around one hand, pulls it taut with the other, and then launches himself at the emperor.

None of them were expecting him to. Of course not— but Tommy knows he's not getting out of this without a fight. He's at least going to leave bruises if he can. The blue loops around the emperor's neck in a flash and they both tumble to the ground, Tommy shouting wordlessly as someone yells and guards pour in through the door—

He's knocked off the emperor before he ever gets the chance to really show him his teeth. The man is left gasping as Tommy is knocked to the floor, hands on every inch of him as he's pressed into the dirt, into the shards of ceramic he'd knocked over only seconds ago. General Technoblade is barking out orders, one hand on Philza's shoulder as he helps him to his feet, and the rest of the faces and voices blur together.

Tommy's cheek hurts. They rip the makeshift weapon from his fingers.

"Enough," Philza is saying, pushing Techno's hands off his shoulders and waving a hand. Tommy can only catch glimpses from where he's being held into the dirt, but he bares his teeth anyways and hopes to Prime that's shown them. He's not a force to be trifled with. Boots come into his vision, and a moment later General Technoblade is peering down at him.

“Let up a bit,” he orders roughly, and the hand on the back of Tommy’s neck vanishes. He lifts his head and glares— Technoblade glares right back.

“Impudent child,” he spits. Tommy pauses, gathers up the spittle in his mouth, and then sends it flying.

General Technoblade lifts a hand and wipes the reddish-tinged spit from his cheek with a scowl.

“Techno.” The emperor is once again in view— a hand on the general’s shoulder and eyes on Tommy. Icy, blue, quite the opposite of his voice. “I’m alright.”

“He tried to strangle you, Phil—”

“And hardly succeeded. I’ll just bruise.” The emperor ghosts a gloved hand over his neck, still looking down at Tommy. He bares his teeth. That’ll show this motherfucker. If he wants to treat him like a dog, then dammit, he’ll act like one.

“Not even worthy of being called a king,” Technoblade says with vicious cruelty, and a tiny, tiny part of Tommy wilts.

“Fuck you,” he says harshly, wincing at the way the words pull at his cut cheek. “Fuck you, fuck your empire, fuck everything you stand for. Monsters. You’re all monsters.”

“We’re all monsters in someone else’s eyes,” Philza says evenly, and he takes Technoblade’s place, crouching in Tommy’s eyeline. He studies him, and Tommy wriggles stubbornly. He won’t be kept down like this. He won’t.

“We should sedate him,” someone says, behind Tommy where he can’t see. “Just until morning. I can call a runekeeper over here.”

“I really don’t think we need to,” Philza says, glancing up and over Tommy’s head. “There’s no way he’s getting out of this camp—”

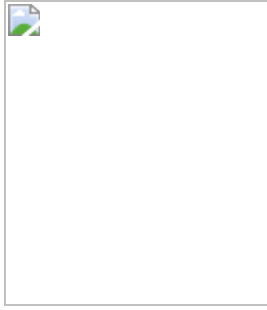
“Doesn’t mean I won’t try, bitch,” Tommy immediately bites out. His whole body has turned to slush. He’s never been in the icehouse— only the cooks and kitchen staff were allowed. But he’s swum in the ocean, felt the cold tides wash over his body more than once. Like the rushing water, chill is poured down his spine at the mention of someone putting him to sleep. His mouth moves before he can think about it, fuelled by panic. “I won’t stop. I won’t. Not until you’re all dead and I’m back in my goddamn palace and the empire is dust. Dust. Fuck you. *Fuck you*, and all your men, and I hope mine killed as many as they could before you *slaughtered* them like the monsters you are.”

Philza’s eyes are a startlingly similar shade to Tommy’s own. He didn’t clock that until now. Dream always said his eyes were like the ocean. Philza is more akin to a glacier.

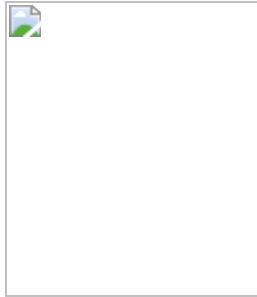
He looks away, once again over Tommy’s head.

“Get a runekeeper,” he says, and Tommy starts to shriek, thrashing against the guards restraining him as panic takes hold. “And tell them to bring some healing.”





In the end, Tommy never gets to watch Caterwaul disappear into the distance behind them. There is no moment when he is able to stick his head out of the carriage door and lay eyes on his city for a final time. No poetic words for when the golden domes of his home disappear into the mist, no laments for what could have been. The interior of the royal carriage is shades of white and blue, intricate painted designs catching Tommy's eye as he sleepily stares at the ceiling. The carriage hits a rut in the road— they jolt, and for a moment he has a view outside of the window, and then he's back in his seat and staring at the ceiling once more as magic settles his nerves. Behind them, the walls of Caterwaul fade.



## Chapter End Notes

welcome to cataclysm!

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

if you're interested in getting updates on this story, make sure to hit the subscribe button, both on my profile and here :) you'll get an email whenever i update!!!!

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hope you enjoyed the first chapter of cataclysm. let's dive in.



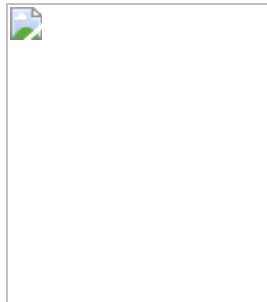
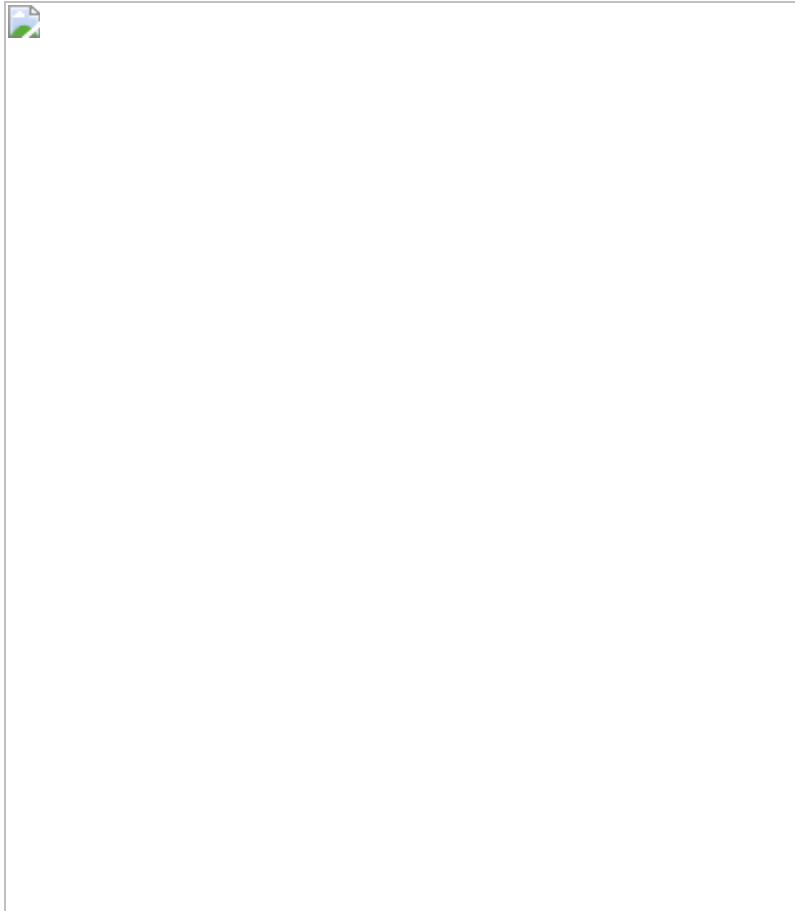
# **arc I. - forgetting, a moment, my place on the menu**

## Chapter Summary

chapter tw / death, graphic description of corpses, emetophobia

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The air is cold.

It sits in Tommy's nose like he's dunked his head underwater, filling him to the brim with its chill. It almost feels like monsoon season, with the cold thunderstorm winds and the electricity in the air. He's inhaled the rain finally, and the cold is sticking to his throat and making his nose stiff. Outside, mountains loom in the distance— he can just see them, foggy with purple and white tips.

“Breakneck Ridge,” the general says absently. Tommy turns— the other man is sat across from him in the carriage, a book in hand, reading glasses on his nose. He wants to smash them into his eyes. Maybe if he's blind the general won't be as frightening. He lowers his arms from the window he's been peering out of, hands bound together once again by rope. He'd lost “arm privileges” on his most recent escape attempt; this one at least only involved him bolting across open fields, not trying to strangle the emperor.

Strangely, no matter what he asks, no matter the curses he shouts and the insults he bites, the Empire refuses to kill him. He wonders what it'll take.

“I know what it is,” he says hotly, and the general does not look up at him. “You can see them from the palace roof at home.”

“Well, look your fill now.” The general turns a page, the soft rustle of paper filling the carriage. “Soon they'll be behind us.”

Tommy wants to argue. He wants to shout insults and spit fire, he wants to raise hell. But he knows from intimate experience that the general will just sit there and take his verbal abuse.

He turns, propping his chin into his cupped and bound hands, and watches the mountains of Breakneck Ridge disappear into the horizon.

Blue and white become his new best friends. A carriage is boring— almost as boring as the companion who reads across from him, blue cloak tight around his shoulders, armors humming with enchantments and tucked neatly into place around his body. Tommy is being escorted, and this carriage is his prison. He isn't stupid, despite how it may appear. Their caravan is a large one— he counted almost four different carriages, a dozen wagons, and a good number of soldiers marching home alongside the general and emperor. They move slowly— a good 3 or 4 companies of men do not walk, they crawl. And most of them are tired. The war has dragged on, Tommy knows this, because it is somewhat his fault.

His own men were exhausted, near the end. His own generals whispering behind his back, Dream's hand firm on his shoulder and reassuring him between late-night war councils that this is the right way to do things.

“I thought you were burning fields,” Tommy says absently. He's still cradling his chin in his palms, staring out at the rolling fields. Occasionally they pass a farmhouse, or a small well, but most of the land is just fields upon fields of wheat, barley, grains. Vegetables. Tommy spots a pumpkin patch at one point, the verdant leaves spiraling upwards on vines with tiny baby pumpkins clinging to the bottoms. He's not sure why he brings it up— he'd been told in scout reports that the Empire had been burning crops as they went, and that had been part of the reason their army was so disgruntled near the end.

Not the end, Tommy reminds himself. It is not the end. Not now, not ever. As long as I am alive, he tells himself, this is not the end.

“Someone was feeding you lies, then,” General Technoblade says without a hitch. He doesn’t question why Tommy is questioning him, after all the hostility. But if he’s going to be forced to sit in the carriage with the guy, he’s going to be as annoying as he possibly can.

“Unless you’re lying to me,” Tommy points out. He leans back against the stupidly soft cushions of the carriage, staring down the general. “I was told you were burning crops. I saw the smoke during the siege.”

“It was a siege,” Technoblade says, still not lifting his eyes from his book. Despite it, Tommy knows he’s keeping watch. It makes him just a little bit proud to be worthy of such a powerful guard. “That’s the point of sieging. To tie up any resources coming in or out.”

“I *know* what a siege is,” Tommy says with a scowl. “That’s not what I was asking. Stop deflecting.”

“I’m hardly deflecting. You don’t want to accept that someone was lying to you.”

“This isn’t a debate!” Tommy’s already regretting starting this conversation. He scowls harder, like perhaps the force of his glare will set the general on fire. It doesn’t work, and any innate magical ability Tommy is hoping will come to light fails him. “Did you burn crops?”

“No,” Technoblade says easily. He finally lifts his gaze from his book, and Tommy makes sure he’s still glaring as they stare at one another. The man’s eyes are red. He fights the urge to shudder.

“Think of it like this,” Technoblade says, ducking his gaze after a moment and startling Tommy slightly. The carriage jostles. Outside, the leeching smell of cow manure drifts over the flat land of the valley. “Perhaps, your people are starving. Perhaps there is a famine because you have lost land after the Great Shudder, the *Cataclysm*, and the only kingdom that has enough food to help refuses to do so. Would you burn the crops you came across during conquest?” The question lingers in the air, and Tommy bites his tongue. Technoblade clearly takes it as a sign to continue. “Your kingdom is not the only one affected by this war, nor the only one at the mercy of this world.”

“The famine isn’t the war’s fault,” Tommy says after a moment. Technoblade sighs. “And if we had enough to share, we would.”

“None of this is getting through your thick skull,” he says, flipping the pages of his book once more. “Clearly.”

“Shut up,” Tommy whisper-hisses, feeling like the bristles on a cat’s spine. “I’ll kill you. With my bare hands.”

“Give me a reason,” General Technoblade says. His words are chilling. “I’d love to return the favor.”

Tommy sinks back into the carriage seat, and it feels like wood instead of the soft cushion it really is. He tips his head back until it bumps against the back of his seat, and a rush of air leaves him all at once. Technoblade is not wrong— Tommy knows if the situation was reversed and his people were the ones starving he would not burn important crops that could be exported back home. And yet, he'd thought for years now they had been. Something must've gone wrong in the chain of command, he reasons. A scout's report misfiled. A tired clerk, or hard-of-hearing soldier. Something. A farmer lying to claim more land for his own behalf. They'd seen plenty of refugees in the capital in the past few months— rumors spread quicker than wildfires, with twice the amount of damage.

He tips his head to watch his kingdom roll by.

At some point, the motions of the carriage become hypnotic. No longer do they have to break a runestone over his head in order to get him to sleep— he's easily tucked up in the corner of the carriage, hands clutched to his chest, the rope digging slightly into his wrists. The cushions are soft and the road is smoother than most, so it's a gentle ride as they plod along for a good part of the day. Tommy can't really remember any finer details of the day before and he thinks he's okay with that, despite it being spent on the road and as a prisoner. It's easier to float, keeping slight attention. He has to come up with something. An actual plan, perhaps, and not just panicked attempts at running when he gets the chance. He has to try and get away before they leave the kingdom— his mind flits to Logstead. Crossing the strait, maybe. He'll get a chance to throw himself right off the edge of the bridge, landing in the cool waters between Lake Lake and the Northern ocean. If he could swim to shore, maybe pilfer a heating rune at some point, keep himself alive until he can wobble his way back to the fort at Logstead and find a sympathetic resident—

It's a stupid plan. He'd be caught on the banks of the strait long before he ever made it back to the fort. And he'd be surprised if there was anyone sympathetic to him now, after everything.

The carriage jolts slightly, and then slows to a stop. General Technoblade is already alert when Tommy drags himself from the recesses of his mind, sliding the curtains aside on the far window and peering out. A moment later, there's a face, half shadowed by the *kharvaa*, a mask draped over their nose. They bear the blues and whites of the Empire.

"General," they say. He nods, sliding open the window latch and opening it. Their voice becomes less muffled.

"Speak," he says. The messenger nods.

"We're approaching a village," they say smoothly. Somewhere outside the carriage, a horse whinnies. Men talk and chatter. Tommy can hear the sound of armor clanking. "Your Highness sent me to gather you two and ride to the front of the march." Tommy tips his head, raising his hands in order to push aside the curtains on his side of the carriage, peeking out and across the landscape. When he looks over again, the messenger's eyes are clearly on him. Staring.

He swallows. "A village?" He asks, interrupting before Technoblade can respond. The messenger's eyes stay on him, but they make no move to speak.

“Thank you,” Technoblade says after a second, nodding. The messenger clearly takes it as a dismissal, and they disappear with the thud of boots on soil as the carriage stays where it is. Tommy can see two steeds just outside— Technoblade turns, eyeing him up and down.

“What?” He asks, scowling deeply. The man shuts his book, tucks it away in some unseen pocket. Tommy leans back as he leans forward, heart jumping— but all the General does is scour his face for a moment with those blood-red eyes.

“You’re not going to run,” he says. It’s not a question— not an order, either. A simple statement, sure in it’s delivery. Tommy swallows, then wrinkles his nose.

“I’ll do what I please,” he shoots back. “Barbarians like you can’t keep me in one place.”

“We can certainly try,” Technoblade responds with ease. He glances away from Tommy, leaning back in his seat, and then goes to open the carriage door. Tommy glares as he watches the hulk of a man exit the doors, and then holds out a hand with a sneer for Tommy to take as he follows. With his hands bound, his balance is sort of fucked, but he refuses to touch him as he clambers out and lets his feet hit the ground. They’re sore— unreasonably so. Technoblade looms above, but he’s not looking at Tommy. Instead, his gaze is on the messenger and the two loops of reins attached to the horses they bear.

“We’ll just need the one,” Technoblade says after a moment.

And that is how Tommy finds himself with his back pressed against the most fearsome general the Continent has seen in a hundred years, riding double.

“This is humiliating,” Tommy mutters, tucking his chin to his chest and ignoring the way he can see people staring from all sides. They’re heading up to the front of the caravan, when before they’d been comfortably in the middle. The rolling fields of the Isles spread out on either side of them, the road a comfortable, tamped-down mix of stones and earth. The horse below them is huge— Tommy had to admit defeat at one point and allowed himself to be tugged up onto the saddle. He’d fought the idea at first, and then the general had suggested Tommy be tied to the reins and dragged along behind.

He’d chosen to ride. Technoblade had swung up behind him, a massive presence of metal and warmth. The air around them isn’t cold, so Tommy has no reason to lean into him. He leans as far forward as he can, instead.

“You’re a flight risk,” the general says in the same monotone drawl he’s had the entire day. “I’m not taking any more chances.”

“You’re just doing this to shame me.”

“It’s an added benefit, perhaps.”

“I hate you. Dickheads. Cruel, the lot of you.”

“Keep shouting insults, pup. See where it gets you.”

“I’d rather be six feet under than trapped in an ice palace. And don’t fucking call me that.”

Technoblade is silent for a moment. As they pass marching men, every company falls silent as they go. Salutes. Technoblade gives every group of soldiers a nod. Eventually, when Tommy finally spots the brilliant spun gold of the Emperor’s hair, he speaks once more. “The palace is not made of ice,” he says, and his voice is low. And then they pull up beside Philza. Both horses settle, and Tommy grips the reins he can get a hold of with vigor so he doesn’t pitch right off. There’s a hand on his shoulder, warm and steady, but he shrugs it off.

“Phil,” the general says. It’s layered over with fondness. Tommy sneers. “You needed us?”

“Hardly needed,” the emperor says with a cheeky grin. For as old as he is, Tommy thinks the man looks strangely young. “Just wanted to check in.”

“We’re alright,” Technoblade says easily. Tommy thinks about kicking the horse into high gear— he probably could, if he angled his knees right. Maybe send Technoblade sprawling in the mud. “How far ahead is Hopsfield?”

“Another hour or two,” Philza says, and Tommy freezes. For a second, all thoughts of escape are blown out of his mind by a frozen breeze. His shoulders stiffen. His neck bristles.

Hopsfield. Everyone in the Opus Isles knows the name of that small settlement, now. Especially Tommy.

“Good,” Technoblade says behind him. The other man is still now— as still as one can get when on the back of a horse. He’s noticed Tommy’s discomfort. “We need to rest for a bit, I think. Are we—”

“Going around, yeah, I think so.” Philza interrupts without a second thought, and when Tommy glances over there’s a spread of parchment sprawled over the neck of his steed and settled in his hands. The man is studying it intensely, and from what Tommy can see in the midday light it’s a map of the Continent. “They haven’t finished filling in the graves yet. I’m assuming we’ll catch the smell any moment now.”

Tommy’s gut wrenches.

“A shame,” Technoblade says quietly. He’s always been quiet— the only reason Tommy can parce his voice out specifically is the low tone it brings to a conversation. Philza’s is more natural— lilting, with an odd accent on some words. Tommy can easily tell the other man spoke Northal first, probably learning Common later in his life. The Continent had been more divided before the Cataclysm. “I figured we’d go through.”

“Technoblade,” the emperor says, a warning in his voice. Tommy flits his gaze between the two.

“What?” The general breaks the silence first, looking out over the golden farms to their left. To the right is a sea of wildflowers, purple and yellow and blue and white. Speckles of color, dotting the green grass. “He might like to see the effects his decisions have on people.”



“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” Tommy says, wrestling his gaze away from the flowers and the reminders of the palace gardens back home. He turns, shifting his weight and leaning forward, raising his hands to his chest in order to balance as he glares. “I know what being king means. You don’t get to lecture me on it.”

Hopsfield.

A military defeat. A battle that lasted a day and a half, ending in a solid loss for the Opus Isles. Tommy thinks that the day he received word of their surrender was the worst day of his life.

...any of the past three days aside.

Thousands of soldiers died here. Tommy tilts his head to the sun and the sky, stretching cloudless blue, endlessly towards the horizon. He squints, and in the distance, can just begin to see the evidence of the battle. Not all their bodies have been carried home yet. Some will never make it. Smoke arrives on the wind, carrying with it the stench of rot.

When the smell arrives, nearly every voice in their caravan goes silent. Soldiers march, hushed by the sight of pyre smoke on the horizon and the scent of death. Many of them have seen battle, are comfortable with death to a degree.

Tommy is not so lucky. He’s never been coddled in his life— thank you, Dream— but he’s also never dealt with death on such a scale up close. Based on the way Technoblade easily takes the reins, and how Philza sits up just a tad bit straighter, they have. Tommy knows they have. They were the ones who crushed his army on these hills, after all.

The only sounds that greet the graveyards are the clanking of armor and the baying of pack mules. A cart clatters occasionally, men calling out orders when it’s needed. No one speaks outside of what is necessary. Tommy holds his breath for long stretches, staring ahead of them.

Philza leans over, hair falling over his face. “We will skirt it,” he tells Tommy solemnly. “But we will not escape it.”

A tree sits on the top of a hill, in the center of the battlefield. Some men lie where they fell— Tommy spots the gold and green of his kingdom side-by-side with blue and white.

“All are equal in death,” Technoblade mutters. Philza only hums in response. Tommy wants to be sick again.

Bloated corpses greet them, fingers and faces swollen and blue. It’s been weeks since the surrender, and still they have not been buried, even temporarily. The devastation carves a swath upon the countryside— parts of the fields have been burned, dark chasms in the center of wildflowers. Bodies are scattered in places, piled in others. Deep pits and trenches lie in the valleys between soft hills, and as they get closer and closer to the smoke Tommy sees more and more people with dirt on their faces and cloth stuffing their noses. One man is on the road— a pile of soldiers are in his cart. Stripped of any belonging worth anything, he struggles to maneuver the cart off the road as the caravan approaches. Philza raises a hand—

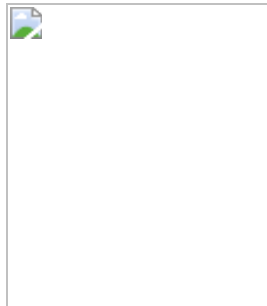
people slow to a halt, and Technoblade slows their own steed for a moment. Soldiers move forward, and carefully but quickly, the corpsebearer's cart is shifted to the side. They pass.

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut. Someone's breathing heavily— it takes a moment for him to realize it's himself, air coming short and ragged in his chest. The clatter of hoofsteps on the road is muted as the dirt becomes muddier and more worn, and a few men curse occasionally as the muck gets worse. Tommy keeps his eyes shut, until an arm passes over his shoulder and a hand grips his chin. Squeezes, gloved fingers firm and unyielding.

“Open your eyes,” Technoblade says. It's not malicious, but it doesn't leave room for argument. Beside them, Philza says nothing as Tommy forces his eyes open once more. Technoblade tilts his head to the left with gentle pressure, and Tommy's forced to stare at the bodies of his people as they pass. His fingers grip his skin and Tommy doesn't bother to try and struggle out of his grasp— he looks. He watches as the hills rise and fall, as the corpsebearer's cart is left in their dust, as they pass more and more carts piled with soldiers. As they pass a mound of dirt stained with charcoal and tamped down by feet. As they pass pyre after pyre.

“The price of war,” Philza says quietly. The very air around them is mourning, thick with smoke and grief. Tommy chokes on it, and Technoblade finally lets go of his chin.

He tucks it to his chest, but doesn't close his eyes again.



Hopsfield rises in the distance, yet Tommy doesn't allow himself to breathe until they're in the settlement proper. The road turns from muck into earth again, then into the cobble that indicates houses and streets. Tommy's head rises from where it had fallen against his chest as he inhales, then exhales— the smell of the dead is impossible to ignore, despite them having left the graves behind almost thirty minutes ago. Even over the city it hangs, a constant reminder of the tragedy. The streets are somewhat empty— a child runs alongside the soldiers as they march into the center of the town, and Tommy ignores the eyes he can feel on his back.

His face isn't unknown. And the fact he's on the same horse as Technoblade, hands bound, face still bearing dried blood from the mug in the war tent a day ago— it's all hints to his identity. The gold and green clothing he's wearing is also a good indicator of his status. He receives just as many glares as he does stares. The people are thin and their eyes are hungry— they watch the soldiers march like they're on death row, solemn and staunch.

Philza is the first to start barking out orders. Technoblade remains with Tommy on the horse as the emperor pulls around and disappears into the crowd of men and women; apparently, he

has been put on guard duty. Tommy doesn't blame either of them. Again, it's almost a rush of satisfaction to think about it.

Camp is set up in a matter of minutes. Tents and fires are lit on the outskirts of Hopsfield, and as soldiers settle in they flit from camp to town, coin purses in tow. Tommy is led to the center of camp, and then unceremoniously, Technoblade lifts him up under his shoulder and dumps him to the ground. He spills out over the earth and rolls slightly, catching himself—glaring as the older man hops down gracefully from his mount. He gives the creature a pat before it's led away.

"Fuck you," Tommy says gracefully. He spits out a clod of dirt. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Every time he shuts his eyes, he can see only bodies. Even now the smoke rises in the distance. The smell has faded, but there's a coating on the back of Tommy's throat and tongue that sticks every time he swallows.

"Get up," Technoblade says without much sympathy. "We're going for a walk. Don't make me leash you."

"Stop treating me like I am a dog," Tommy insists with bared teeth, pushing himself up and out of the mucky soil. It stains his clothes worse than they already are, but he brushes himself down the best he can with bound fingers. Technoblade at least waits a moment for him to collect himself before brushing off in a random direction. Tommy glances around—most men are busy setting up for the night. He could run. It might be worth it.

"Your Majesty," Technoblade says. The words curl like venom over his tongue and it's bitter to hear it in his mouth. Tommy looks over, tries to straighten his posture. The general is beckoning. There is a warning on his fingertips, in his tone.

Tommy's stomach wrenches, and he follows.

Prime, he hopes Dream is out there. Somewhere, his most trusted friend is plotting a way to get him back. He thinks he would've heard if Dream had abandoned him truly, or been captured; it's no secret, his rank. He's been with Tommy ever since he was a baby, since the death of his parents and his rise to rule. Dream has been there every step of the way with a plan, and Tommy knows he's got to have some kind of idea now. He's probably in hiding, he soothes himself quietly, eyes up and shoulders back as they make their way across the Empire's war camp. His gaze flits from soldier to soldier—for a moment, he can pretend he's with Dream again. That the colors lining these soldiers are gold and green, not blue and white. He's behind his mentor again, his brother, scouring their camps and planning strategy to crush the Empire under their soles. The tall facade of General Technoblade melts away into the slimmer, leaner build of Dream. His signature green rings flash on his hands as he expresses, glinting in the sunlight. Beyond them, the walls of Caterwaul rise up in all their limestone glory. This, at least, is familiar.

Then Technoblade turns, a hand pressing against his shoulder, and they both stop.

“Do not make a fool of yourself,” is the only advice he offers. Then the campfires and tents fade out, and into the streets of Hopsfield they go.

It’s worse on foot than it is on horseback. Tommy clenches his palms together until they’re sweaty, keeping his gaze on the back of Technoblade’s head as they walk. People mutter—he can hear them faintly, like the citizens at the gates. Thankfully, no one throws anything.

“Where are we going?” Tommy finally asks, jogging a moment to catch up to the general and match his pace. The man doesn’t even look at him. Instead he keeps his head up, scouring the streets around them as if looking for some type of threat. Tommy’s doing the same—except he’s looking for a way out.

“Philza,” Technoblade says, by way of an explanation. “He’s setting up in one of these houses. Ah.” Tommy’s head swivels, and there, hanging out one of the house’s windows is a flag of the Empire. He glares at the chrysanthemums as they make their way to the door.

Hopsfield is a patchwork quilt. Houses stacked on top of one another, sewn into the walls of others and overlapping into the street. Some of the houses are clearly empty—doorways open, dust lingering on the windowsills. Some are inhabited but quiet, even others are full of life. Tommy drags his eyes away from a bundle of small children playing with knucklebones in order to follow Technoblade up the steps. The children are watching them— one is small, blond, a skinny little thing with faded grey eyes and a loose blue shirt. It’s clearly a hand-me-down, or perhaps, something taken from Peasant’s Hill and it’s graveyards.

Tommy looks away and feels his stomach wrench.

“I’m going to—” it’s all he has time for in warning, and then warm bile is crawling up the back of his throat and he’s staggering to the side, off of the front steps. General Technoblade whirls after him— most likely thinking Tommy is trying to escape once more, but all the disgraced king does is crumple to his knees in the gutters of the road and upheave.

Disgraced king, his mind says traitorously as he wipes spittle from his mouth onto the back of his hand. There’s not much in his stomach to throw up, so it’s just dry-heaving at a certain point. He stares at the mess and pretends he’s not crying.

“Thomas.” Technoblade’s voice is firm but unmoving. Tommy refuses to rise from his feet. “Pup. Come on, if you’re finished.” He offers no comforting hand on his back, no cool hand against Tommy’s warm brow. He just stands there, even as Tommy hunches his shoulders in further and gags one last time. Every time he squeezes his eyes shut, he can see them. A little boy in a dead man’s shirt. The dead man, dumped into an earthen hole. Fires rising into the sky as armor and weapons are piled onto carts, corpsebearers marching along the streets of a tiny town and crying out for the dead. Prime, her holy statues along the road. Tommy whispers a prayer, even as his stomach heaves once more.

General Technoblade is thankfully quiet. There’s no mercy in his eyes or voice when he lifts Tommy to his feet an eon later, but his hands at least are somewhat gentle and he doesn’t force them to go.

When he manages to look next, through blurry, teary eyes, the children in the street are gone. Technoblade leads him inside.



Philza greets them inside with a cheery voice. It's too cheery. It makes Tommy want to hurl again. Once, when he was very small, he'd gotten into the pastries the cook had made for his birthday the night before. He'd gorged himself on the cookies, specifically the ones with thumbprints in the middle filled with peach jam. They had been his favorite when he was little. He'd eaten a whole platter of things before they had started to turn his stomach, and Dream had found him crying in the arms of a maid as he'd gotten sick over and over. Even after there was nothing left to expel, he'd still felt that rolling nausea for days afterwards. He'd never been able to eat thumbprint cookies or peach jam ever again after that.

He feels like he did then. His stomach is constantly in motion, even as Technoblade explains in hushed tones his nerves. Philza gives him a pitying look— Prime, does he hate it. He doesn't deserve pity. He should be feared, or regarded with suspicion at best. They're ushered into the small living space of the house they'd commandeered, and Tommy is sat down by the cold and empty hearth as soldiers and men march around the room. Technoblade remains by his side for the most part— he calls out his orders from Tommy's right side, standing even as Tommy sits in an old, dusty kitchen chair. At some point, someone presses a cup of tea into his hands.

"Ginger and fennel," the emperor says, when he notices Tommy sniffing suspiciously at the mug clenched between his hands. "Good for nausea."

Hey, if it's poisoned, at least he'll be dead. Tommy sips at it eventually, once the temperature's gone down from scalding to lukewarm. It's not... bad. It's not good either. It does nothing to settle his stomach.

Eventually, a table has been pulled into the room, and Philza stands at the head. His cloak is long, split into two— his back is to Tommy, and it gives him ample time to study the blooming flower on the back. It's embroidery, shades of blue and white and grey and silver, overlaid on the cloak and parted down the middle where it splits. They say in battle, the man's cloak flares out beyond him and resembles wings. Standing here at the table, Tommy thinks it just looks like a very fancy cloak.

"—reach Osprey by the end of the week." Philza's voice croons through the room, and Tommy snaps to attention. He hadn't been, with his nose stuffed in the mug of hot tea and stifling out the smell of death, but now he is. He should've been paying attention from the start, dammit. Fuck his upset stomach, and fuck General Technoblade who is *still* standing beside him. The emperor continues: "With good fortune, the lake won't have frozen over yet. From there to

Raven's Flight is simple. I'm leaving four companies here– they'll each take a Cardinal Road and spread out to give news of the Isles' surrender."

"We haven't surrendered," Tommy pipes up before he can stop himself. All eyes in the room shift to him. He stays where he is– spine straightening, swallowing slightly. He lets the mug in his hands fall to his lap. He's so brutally aware of his position, now. "Not formally."

"You surrendered the moment you laid your weapon down in your throne room," General Technoblade tells him, and Tommy tilts his head up to meet his eyes with a grimace. He doesn't want to be reminded.

"But not *formally*," Tommy reiterates. "No papers were signed. I have not agreed to any truces. The Isles are still liberated as long as I don't."

"And you will," Philza says evenly. His hands are splayed against the wood grain of the borrowed table, maps and parchment strewn across it. Every eye in the room is on him. Technoblade's hand lands stiffly on his shoulder. "Once we get to Raven's Flight."

"News of Caterwaul's fall will have already reached the other nations," someone pipes up. "Libra and the Vaults will want to send delegations."

"Which is why it's our utmost priority to reach the capital quickly," Philza says. "I want to beat them there. We'll convene like we did seven years ago."

"The Isles didn't attend the Conference," Tommy reminds him. He moves to stand, but Technoblade's hand on his shoulder keeps him strictly in his seat. The Diamond Conference– Tommy was only seven when it had been called, and Dream had refused the invitation for him. The right call, as it turned out, since the Empire was a hungry beast and Tommy is sure they would have invaded despite any agreements made. "It is fundamentally different. I am a prisoner, not a political delegation. This– it's not fair."

He sounds like a whiny baby, he knows it. But he still meets Philza's gaze when the emperor looks at him, swallowing hard.

"Life is not fair," Philza says quietly. "The Empire has won. The Isles are under our control. Advisors for you will be shipped up as soon as things in the capital are under control. Sneeg will make sure of it." Tommy faintly remembers the brown-haired man in Empire blue and frowns. Beside him, General Technoblade shakes his head.

"Stand down," he tells Tommy. Then, to Phil, "Our forces are spread thin. The men you leave here mean we will have less protection at Raven's Flight when the other delegations come. It leaves us open to attack on any of our borders at the moment, and weak to an insurgence if the populace decides they don't want to listen to our rules." Tommy's expecting Philza to get slightly angry with the General's tone– he's brash, assuming, and cold. But despite the attitude, Philza only hums, turning and scanning over the maps and then the men in the room.

"You're right," he acquiesces, much to Tommy's surprise. "We'll only leave three companies here, then, and bring one with us to the palace. Take the north, east, and western roads."

Technoblade will assign each to you.” Philza turns his head and nods, and finally, Technoblade is no longer by Tommy’s side. He’s elated for a brief moment– maybe he’ll get to make another break for it if he really tries– but then Philza steps back and falls into the general’s empty spot. Technoblade takes the head of the table.

Tommy’s shoulders slump backwards, and Philza’s smile meets his empty gaze.

“Is the tea helping?” The emperor asks after a second. Quiet, but it cuts over the dull monotone of the general’s voice as he begins to hand out orders to the majors and commanders in the room. Tommy snaps his gaze up, and then dips it again when he finds the man staring at him. With that stupid smile and all– pity, plain as the day on his face.

“It’s fine,” Tommy says, despite it not helping whatsoever. He’s still nauseous, still shivery whenever he lets his fingers so much as shift on the ceramic.

“Why don’t we walk?” Philza asks after a moment. The rest of the room is a fog of voices and people. There’s a hand on Tommy’s arm and he lets himself be pulled up and out of his seat. “Get some fresh air.”

He can’t really refuse. They make their way out of the room, Philza taking the half-empty mug from his hands and it disappears. Tommy can’t keep track of anything, right now. Everything is hazy and his breath is coming too quick, and– and–

And outside, the sky is a thousand different colors as the sun sets. The emperor has his hand on Tommy’s arm, and together they walk down the cobbled streets of Hopsfield. Behind them is the camp, with its campfires and canvas tents and soldiers. The air no longer smells like rot– for the moment, it smells like oatmeal and fried meats and woodsmoke. Tommy focuses on it, focuses on the fact that the world isn’t clogged with dead souls.

But it is. As the sun sets further, candles light in every window.

“I was here once before,” Philza says after a little bit of walking. The sky glimmers above them, peach and clementine and lavender. On the other side, it’s sinking into a deep indigo. Just the barest hints of starlight are making themselves known. “Before the battle at the hill.”

“Where you killed thousands of my people?”

“And where you killed thousands of mine. Many unnecessary lives have been lost to this war.”

“A war you started.”

“I don’t deny that I did.”

“You’re a natural disaster,” Tommy spits out, wrenching his arm out from the emperor’s grasp. The man makes no moves to follow him– he staggers backwards, a few steps away. It’s the most alone he’s been in three days, but his head has never felt so stuffed. “Worse than the Cataclysm. Worse than any hurricane or monsoon. You’re destroying my home. You’re killing us. Killing me. I hate you and I hate you and I think you should die in a fire and I hope

your miserable, stupid, old life comes to a meaningless end.” It’s vitriol and venom, but Philza hardly flinches. He just watches as Tommy staggers once more, and then he crumples. Back on his knees, powerless. Even when given the chance, he can’t find an outcome where fleeing does him any good.

“I understand your anger,” Philza says. Somewhere, a firecracker rune pops. Gunpowder and smoke fill the air, followed by the sound of jeering laughter. Celebrations. The emperor’s face is shadowed by the setting sun, long splotches of void stretching over the cobblestones and painting Tommy in it’s darkness. “But you need to understand me, as well.” The smile is gone from the man’s face. He’s not looking at Tommy anymore, either. “I have something that I must protect.”

“I know the feeling,” Tommy declares, because he does. He knows it intimately. He’s kneeling on his purpose right now, the very earth under his fingertips. His land. His people. Loyalty to those he serves beyond anything else. Dream would be proud, he thinks— his chest swells. He is not losing face here. Not when he’s still on his own home turf.

The thought of Raven’s Flight and the Empire makes him want to hurl again, of course, but that’s a problem for Future Tommy when he gets there.

“I see.” Philza is looking at him again. Tommy has to squint as the sun haloes his head, dipping below the horizon and shining the countryside in swathes of golden wheat and grain. A baby cries somewhere down the road. A breeze rustles out of nowhere, and Philza’s cloak catches it, spreading wide for just a moment.

Outlined by sunfire and color, Tommy thinks he can almost see wings.



They spend the night in Hopsfield. It’s uncomfortable, but Tommy sucks it up and spends as much time as he can on the cot he is given. He will never say no to sleep— not after the last four or five days, where he’d hardly gotten any save the runekeeper who sedated him back at Caterwaul. By morning, one company is packing up to follow them to Raven’s Flight, and three others are packing up to spread out across the Opus Isles countryside.

“They’ll take the Cardinal Roads,” Technoblade explains that morning, when he sees Tommy staring intently. “One to the north, one east, one west. They’ll spread the news of our victory, and start sending your troops back home and providing relief.”

“I know how it works,” Tommy says back to him. His hands are untied— Philza had done it last night, as they’d walked back to the house where they’d left the general and the other commanders. (*A chance* , he’d explained, eyes glinting.) No one had bothered to retie them



yet. Tommy's not going to remind them. He still doesn't get his own horse, nor is he allowed out of General Technoblade's sight, but he's at least got the function of his hands back.

The carriage awaits them that morning, and Tommy hesitantly climbs in, Technoblade hot on his heels. This time, however, Emperor Philza joins them. Tommy keeps to himself in the farthest corner from both of them, feet pulled up with his chin on his knees, arms around his legs. He plants his boots against the gaudy cushions and hopes the mud stains. He leaves a long scratch with one fingernail in the paint when he thinks neither of them are looking. If they do notice, either say anything. General Technoblade reads— Philza has papers in hand and people coming up to the door near constantly to deliver messages or give updates.

"It'll take a day to reach the strait," Philza mutters at some point, mostly to himself. Technoblade grunts in response. Tommy stares out the window and pretends he can't hear them. "If we rush, we'll get there by nightfall. Then from there up the north. Perhaps we should stay a day or two in Osprey. Or I will, and you can take the young king here—"

Tommy snaps. "I am not young," he insists, fingers clenching into fists as he glares both of them down. Philza looks up, matching his gaze, but Technoblade is stoic as ever.

"You're fourteen," Philza says. He raises a brow. "Hardly more than a child."

"I'm *king*," Tommy reminds them. "I've been king my whole life. I'm not incompetent."

Just a slight bit traumatized, his brain offers up. He swats it away as Philza heaves a sigh.

"A child can be competent," he admits, looking back down at the sheaves of paper in his hands. "But it doesn't change the fact you're a child, mate."

"A lot of your so-called competence has been killing people," General Technoblade juts in.

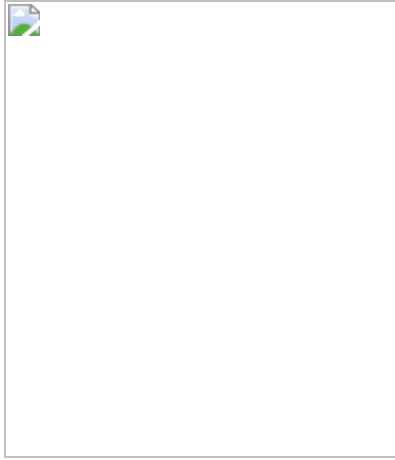
"Don't start an argument," Philza chides, holding a hand out between them both before Tommy can throw himself at the warrior. The cabin falls quiet, and around them the sounds of the convoy echo. There's a shuffle of parchment as Technoblade turns a page in his book.

"I hate you," Tommy spits. Technoblade chuckles.

"You've said, pup."

"Stop *calling* me that."

Philza leans backwards in his seat, one hand raised and pressed to the center of his forehead, smoothing out the lines there. "Osprey," he says, as though it's a prayer. "Just make it to Osprey."



## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

this chapter is kind of a doozy but it's fine- tommy is learning about the consequences of war after all. this fic will get dark at times and this is an example of that!!

if you're enjoying, be sure to subscribe to both the story and me on ao3 :) i post cool stuff and do cool things. also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

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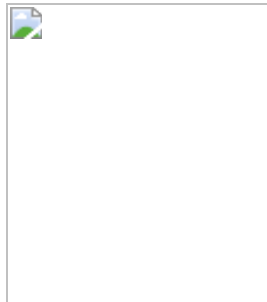
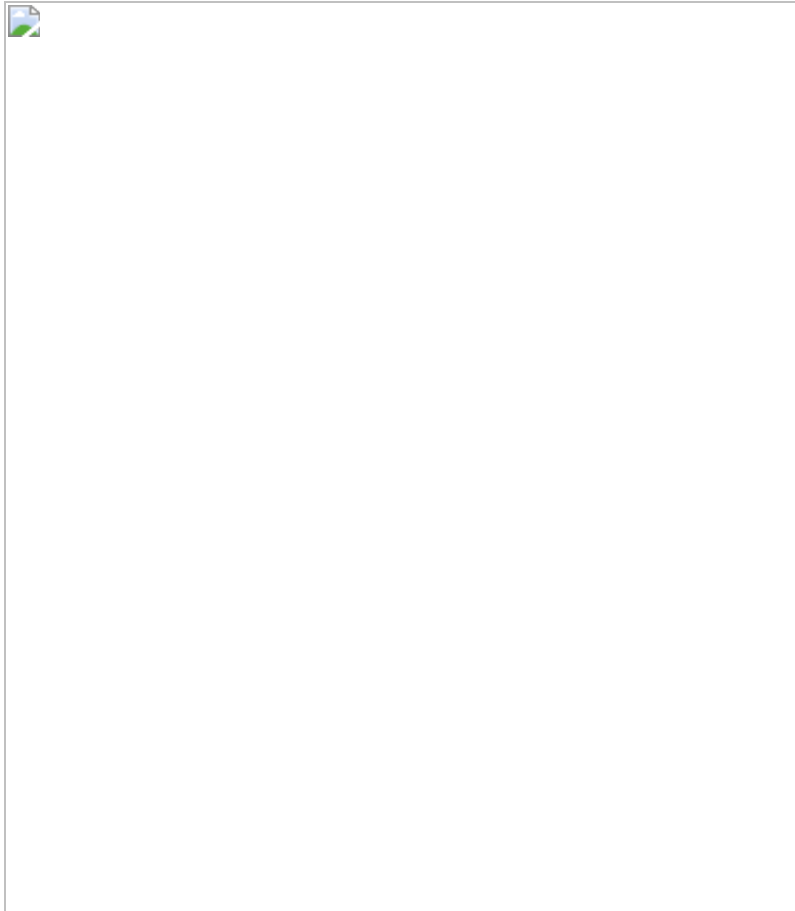
# arc I. - goodbye to a world

## Chapter Summary

chapter tw / N/A

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Someone's screaming.

Tommy thinks it might be himself. Terrified cries pour from his mouth, each inhale ragged and desperate. He's shouting, screaming, clawing at the walls as something sticky and red and viscous leaks from them. He raises his hands to his face, and yet he cannot see them. He knows what the liquid is from smell alone— iron and rot fill his sinuses, send his head spinning with desperation once more. He's trapped. He needs to get out. He needs to escape, to flee, to rid his hands of the blood that's clinging to them and find a way to unburden himself of its weight. Despite the blood still on his fists, he raises them to his shoulders and crosses his arms over his chest— the basic prayer form, the one that all statues of Prime bear, the one that defines churches and that children are taught when they are very, very small.

Tommy is very, very small. His knees are sore against the smooth floor of his bedroom— his childhood bedroom, not the one he was sleeping in for the past five years. Playthings lay scattered around the room, toy maps and swords. His crown is lying on the floor as well, and beyond the mess, Dream is pacing.

It's all he seems to do these days is pace, Tommy thinks, letting his arms fall from prayer. He looks at his hands. They're clean.

"The western route isn't clear," Dream is muttering. "Escape routes via sea are viable. The Allium islands could be a place of refuge."

"Dream," Tommy calls out. The man's head snaps towards him and the relief that floods through Tommy is unmeasurable. He scrambles to his feet, flying towards the familiar blond hair and freckles that were always the most precious part of his home. Dream holds his arms out, and Tommy slams into them, wrapping his arms around the man's torso and squeezing. "I missed you," he chokes out, digging his fingers into the back of his shirt. It's a heavy material in his grasp, thick with embroidery thread. Dream makes a soft choking noise. Tommy freezes— the blond hair against his head shuffles.

It's Dream's voice that says: "I missed you too, Tommy." But it's Philza when Tommy pulls away— Philza in full battle armor, his cloak flaring behind his back in the shape of raven wings. There is blood on his face, soaking his boots, and now it's on Tommy's hands once more. Desperately he tries to wipe it away, scrambling backwards, the backs of his knees hitting his bed. Something squishes under his heel— he turns.

The bed is gone. All that remains is a pile of dead corpses, bloated and blue. Blackened fingertips reach for him. Tommy can't help it— he screams, pitching forwards.

Hands on his shoulders, a voice in his ear. A lantern is lit on his left. Tommy snaps his eyes open and meets the concerned gaze of Emperor Philza Minecraft Watson, whose hands are braced on his shoulders as he nearly slips off the seat of the carriage. Beyond the curtains of the carriage windows, the sky is dark.

"Careful," the emperor says, and Tommy flails for a moment as he regains his footing and pushes himself back up onto the cushioned seat. "You fell asleep for a bit there, mate."

The carriage is rocking now, jolting every two or three seconds at a pace much quicker than before. Tommy blinks away the sleep from his eyes, brushing off his shoulders one hand at a time like maybe it'll rid them of the sensation. The emperor's hands steadying him— it's

something he doesn't want to think about. Across from him, General Technoblade sits with legs crossed and hands in his lap— he's looking outside, head tilted and framed by shadow. The carriage is dark. Tommy leans back, and then tips his head. Lifts a hand and brushes the curtains back from the window.

“Logstead,” Philza says calmly as Tommy takes in the lights of the city. Candles in every window, military men at every street corner. “We’re just passing through. Over the strait tonight, to Helton. You might want to try and get some more sleep.”

Tommy thinks about the nightmare he just awoke from, and shakes his head.

Logstead is a port city— they’re coming over the ridge now that leads down into the strait proper, and Tommy watches as the skyline of the town rises up over the water. To their east, the Northern Ocean spreads out, a silent monster of whitecaps and whaling ships. To the west, Lake Lake stretches inland. Merchant ships are docked— if he squints, Tommy can make out their shapes against the lake’s water, dark and looming. He never knew a world without the strait and the two cities that occupy it, but he’s heard stories. Back when Helton and Logstead were combined— one settlement instead of two. That is, before the water flooded through and broke them apart as the rest of the Continent shook with magic.

Logstead is the last bastion of the Isles. The last part of his home that is truly his home— once they cross the strait, they’ll be in Empire territory. This is Tommy’s last chance to make his escape and stay in his homeland. If he crosses that dark water, there’s no certainty he’ll ever come back.

Philza and Technoblade are silent, for the most part. Neither of them are reading or working anymore— the light is too dim for that, the sway of the carriage making the lantern too wobbly for good reading light. Instead, the emperor is pressed to the general’s side, squished together in this convoy and resting his head lightly on the taller man’s shoulders. His eyes are shut. The general is quiet, and Tommy once again brings his knees to his chest and prays.

The shapes of Logstead grow larger, and eventually, the carriage slows to a crawl. Technoblade elbows the emperor after a moment; the man picks his head up from the general’s shoulder with a mild yawn, fingers tugging his dark gloves back onto his hands and after a second, he moves to the door and unlatches it. At Tommy’s gaze, he smiles. “Shift change,” he explains, gesturing to where the driver would be sitting. “I want to check on supplies,” he offers, more to Technoblade than anyone else. “Make sure we’re all set for the journey.”

“I have to pee,” Tommy says, before the general can respond. Two sets of eyes flick to him, and then Philza smiles.

“Stretch your legs,” he nods. “Both of you. We’ve got a long ride ahead of us.”

If Tommy manages to come up with a plan in the next five minutes, his ride will not be as long as the emperor thinks.

They all tumble out of the carriage like newborn deer, feet wobbly after being out of use for the day. Tommy takes a minute to properly stretch— reach down to his toes, stretch his arms

above his head. Military style, the same ones Dream had drilled him on every morning since he was five. When he raises his head from touching his toes, General Technoblade is watching him. His glasses glint in the lantern light, hiding most of his expression, but Tommy sees enough of those blood-red eyes to know he's watching.

Escape is not guaranteed, but this is his last chance to be on familiar soil.

"Hurry," Technoblade says, a hand on Tommy's shoulder and marching him a bit away from the convoy at large. "Philza won't wait if you take too long."

"Maybe I'll drag this out, then," Tommy sneers. "You can just leave me behind, it's fine. I don't need to come with."

"Quit it and piss already," Technoblade says with an exasperated sigh, giving Tommy the slightest nudge towards the trees. He sticks his tongue out at the man in defiance— it's childish, yes, but it's the best he's got right now.

"You think I could get water?" Tommy asks, stepping forward into the brush. It's a small bundle of trees— to his left is Logstead, to the right an open field. "And a heating rune, maybe, I feel like shit. Greasy."

"No," Technoblade says. "Deal with it."

"Fuck you," Tommy crows. Right or left— which does he pick? "Is the runekeeper still with us?"

Technoblade turns his head for a split second, glancing over his shoulder as though to check. This is Tommy's chance.

He goes right.

Tommy knows plenty of things about the Blood God's favorite warrior. The general, framed by legends of his brutality and skill. His loyalty to the Empire and always seen at Philza's side— the man is a myth in some rural parts of the world. Be good, mothers tell their kids. Be good, or I'll go get the Empire's general to show you what happens to naughty children. Tommy has heard plenty of rumors towards the man's skill and even more towards his icy temperament. How he crushes skulls with his bare hands and spares no one. No mercy. He's heard of his prowess, but it's different than seeing it up close with his own eyes.

Dream had always taught him to fight with his mind. Brains over brawn— and in this case, speed. The Blood God's warrior is heavysset, laden with armor and a cloak.

Tommy is light on his feet and small. He's dressed in a color similar to the grasses in the field. The good General needs to wear reading glasses.

He bolts to the right and hopes to Prime he's made the smartest choice.

He hears the shouts only a second later, as Technoblade realizes what he's planning. But he's a good foot away from him and a hair faster— Tommy escapes the reaching hand with a duck and weave, feet pounding against the earth as he makes a run for the fields. Behind him, the

caravan is already in an uproar, and he can hear the clatter of metal on metal as soldiers draw to attention. It's almost thrilling. So much attention just on him, the silly little boy king from down south. Yeah, he'll show them.

The grasses rise up, kiss his hips, and then envelop him fully. The wildflowers grow high in the summer, in the fields that lie empty as crops are rotated. Tommy takes this as his advantage, ducking his head down low and planting his feet in-between the bundles of roots, following quail trails and bird paths. Behind him, he can hear the delicate stalks breaking as Technoblade blunders through, lanterns and torches following him through the grass. He runs— he runs until his chest is heaving and his breath is coming short and the shouts are still there, but they are faded. Only then does he throw himself to the ground, tucked up between thickets and flowers. The earth is warm; it still holds the day's heat, and he's sweating as he lies there and covers his mouth with one hand. He doesn't risk popping his head above the grasses— he doesn't want to be seen. It's easier down here, in the thick stench of summer and soil. Someone is shouting, and above it all, Tommy can hear Technoblade giving orders.

They're looking for him. It's only a matter of time if he stays here, hidden amongst the grass. They could take a torch to the edge of the field and burn it down if they wanted, forcing him out like a rat in a trap. Or they'd call the runekeeper over and make a compass— he could run as far as he pleased and still be caught eventually. He'd heard stories of manhunters who did that. Dream had played the game once, although it had been pale in comparison to actual bounty hunters.

He wonders if this is how those fugitives feel— trapped, no place to go. Perhaps he can wait it out. Most likely not.

He'll try anyway.

"Thomas." The emperor's voice rings out above the rest, clear as a bell. He's close— Tommy stops breathing. "Come out, alright? I know you're still in here— come on. You've got to come back, mate. It's over."

It's not over until he's dead. Tommy stubbornly keeps his mouth shut and breathing light. Somewhere to his left, grass crinkles, and he whips his head around to watch as a lantern bobs.

"Pup," Technoblade calls out. The voices of soldiers have faded some. "Now is your chance."

"It's alright," the emperor soothes.

"If you don't come out," Technoblade counters, "we'll burn this field down with you in it." There's a mutter of voices, low and argumentative, and then Philza's voice once more.

"Please," he says. It's the first 'please' he's heard out of the man. "Thomas."

Tommy squeezes his eyes shut, gnawing on his lip hard enough for it to bleed. The lantern light gets closer, and closer— and then there's a hand on the back of his neck and he's being hauled up by the fabric of his shirt. He does try to scramble away again— frantically digging

his feet into the earth and trying to bolt, if only for appearance's sake. Technoblade's hand is steady and strong, however, and he can't even move five inches without being tugged back to the man's side. Philza's hair is loose, hanging down in golden threads around his ears, and Technoblade is expressionless as they stand there in the grass.

"We've got him," Technoblade eventually calls. There's more shouts, and people coming their way.

Tommy does his best not to cry. He fails.



He loses arm privileges permanently, after that. He curses out Technoblade as fiercely as possible the entire time, snapping with his teeth whenever fingers get too close to any part of him. He's herded into the carriage after a few minutes of hot debate between the emperor and general about where he should be kept and who should stay— in the end, General Technoblade is the one who joins him. He doesn't read anymore. He just sits there, hands clasped in his lap and eyes unmoving from Tommy's figure. Tommy, who at first gnaws on the ropes around his hands. It's almost worth it, but there's a curl to the man's lips that's humiliating and Tommy knows even if he did get them off, he'd be right back in them within five minutes.

"We gave you plenty of chances," Technoblade says at one point. "Or— Philza did. Lessons to be learned." Tommy can only scowl in his direction and shoot mockery of his words back. It doesn't even faze the man.

After his teeth start hurting, Tommy turns to the window again. They've been stuck in one spot for a while now— most of the lights in Logstead have gone out, leaving the countryside dark. Out on the harbor, Tommy can spot ships, lit up occasionally by lanterns and light. Apparently his escape attempt has stalled them somewhat, but eventually the carriage jolts to movement again.

They pass by Logstead. Distantly, Tommy can hear the sounds of people and celebrations. Celebrating their loss, the Empire's win. Bitterly he sinks back in his seat and inhales— he can smell the ocean from here, and it's a delight. Or, as delightful as things can be when they're dire. Outside, the lights of Logstead are steadily shifting to be behind them, and roads are converging. It's late, but that doesn't mean they're empty. As they approach the bridge connecting the strait, market stalls start to pop up every few feet. Shopkeepers selling trinkets, food, everything Tommy could possibly think of is here. He sniffs the air a few times, glancing longingly towards a few seafood stalls as they pass by. Here, by the coast, food is aplenty when the time is right. Their lanterns are lit and soldiers break formation a few times to cluster around— the whole area is lit up and laughter abounds. No one seems to



notice or care that Tommy's in the carriage. No one looks twice at it as they pass, except for the once or twice a jeering call is sent their way from a shopkeeper trying to sell.

"I wish we could stop," Tommy says at one point, glancing back at Technoblade and trying to get his point across. "Get something to eat?"

The man's face is stoic, and it only takes one slow shake of his head for Tommy to understand. He's not only lost arm privileges— he's lost just about everything else, too.

As the bridge comes into view, he leans back from the window of the carriage and sinks low.

He doesn't want to watch. Not as the last vestiges of his home fade out into darkness, as guards spanning the bridge shout out and as papers are brandished. Emperor Philza appears for a moment, dipping his head into the carriage and handing over a few documents to Technoblade. Before he knows it, wood is creaking under their wheels as they cross the physical divide. It's not a long journey— it takes fifteen minutes, tops, to get to the other side. Wood creaks the whole way, and Tommy prays that the structure will collapse and send them all tumbling down into the dark cold waters of the sea. It doesn't happen. Timbers groan and carriage wheels plod on.

If he was any more talented in the arts, Tommy might have something to say about that. Two kingdoms, split from one another in the most literal sense. A bridge built between them, metaphorically linking their destinies. Fate entwined, two populations reduced to this:

On one side of the bridge is a country that Tommy knows and loves with all his heart. On one side, his family and home, but also the bodies of soldiers that gave their lives for an unsuccessful war.

On the other side, a kingdom torn apart by famine and desperation, frozen wind echoing in their canyons and over the tops of their tundras. It's the unknown, and it's approaching so quickly it feels like the tide. Ready to swallow and consume, stripping flesh from bone.

Tommy's not sure how long it'll take for him to be worn down to a skeleton of his former self.



The other side of the strait is not too different from the Isles' side. Tommy was expecting something more drastic— perhaps the air would smell a certain way, or the people would change and become more hostile. The buildings or roads would change. Something would mark this town as different from Logstead, something intrinsic and immovable.

All he can tell as they pass onto solid ground once more is that there's way more Empire flags hung from windows than in Logstead. That, and some of the signs are written in the sharpened lilt of the Empire's language, Northal.

Emperor Philza joins them again, once they're over the bridge. He slips his way into the carriage like a fish, moving with ease and without exhaustion as they're carried into the center of town.

"I've arranged a place for the night," he informs both Technoblade and Tommy. "We'll rest and head out in the morning, then travel non-stop until Osprey. We'll get a change of horses periodically."

"Sounds fair," General Technoblade says quietly, clearly stifling a yawn. Tommy narrows his eyes. "How many posted outside? To keep the brat in check?"

"You're a bitch," Tommy shoots back.

"Four," Philza says with a lopsided grin. "Get along, now."

"I'll give you two old men another workout if I have to," Tommy says, wiggling his shoulders until they're straight and he can look the two of them head-on. "I don't need my hands to draw blood."

"So scary," Technoblade drawls. "I'm shaking in my boots." The emperor reaches out and swats his shoulder— Tommy scowls deeply.

"You will be," he promises, as darkly as he can manage. The moment he has a chance to get his damn hands on the general— well, it'll be a day. Technoblade only raises an eyebrow before turning to the emperor once more. "I swear it! You'll regret this, and everything you've ever done. I've heard stories. I know who you are—"

"Stories often hide terrible truths," Philza cuts in, and Tommy snaps his mouth shut with a grimace. "Don't believe rumors."

"I haven't heard rumors," Tommy leans in, wracking his brain for a moment to think. "Truths. The fighting rings, I think. Traveling. They say you once impaled a man through the eye, and yet he still lived. Precision was a talent of yours. Didn't you have a title? The Monster of—"

"Shut up," Technoblade says in a whirl of fury, and immediately, Tommy sinks in his seat. His anger seems to fill the whole space, although the general has hardly moved. In the dim light of the lanterns, Tommy swears his eyes are glowing red (and maybe it's not as surprising as he wants it to be). "You don't know anything. You're a spoiled brat raised in a selfish palace of splendor. You're lucky we're not dragging you behind us on ropes. Given time, I'm sure I could convince Phil that stricter methods of capture need to be implemented with you. Wretched, wriggly thing." He spits the last bit, and then in Northal: "A gold soul does not mean you are exempt from darkness."

At some point, the carriage had stopped. Tommy sits frozen in a mix of shock and fear, biting his tongue as Technoblade clearly seethes in front of him. Philza sits quietly, only moving in order to let the general pass by and duck his way out of the small space. The air that filters in from the door is cool, but not unbearable. It still makes Tommy shiver, goosebumps rising on the back of his neck as the proverb Technoblade had just delivered echoes in his ears.

“He can’t talk to me like that,” he eventually stammers, turning to look at the emperor. The man’s face is still, shadowed by the swinging lantern outside. “What a *dick*, I’m still a king. I’m—”

“He’s right,” Philza says, voice considerably colder than before. “We are being lenient with you. You would be better off to remember that. The Empire does not usually treat its enemies kindly. This should already be a lesson you’ve learned.”

Tommy thinks of golden soldiers drenched in blood and swallows. He nods.

“Come along,” the emperor says.

They spend the night in Helton. Tommy does not get to see much of the city— he hardly gets to see things at all. On the hill sits The General’s Fort; if he visualizes the war room map he’d been sitting around only a week or two ago, he can picture the little blue chess piece they’d used to represent the Empire. This is their fort, the headquarters of their military strength, and Tommy is smack-dab in the middle of its fortifications. Escape is unthinkable. The place is more secure than Tommy’s own bedroom, crawling with Empire soldiers and citizens. And he’s not let out of either the Emperor’s or Technoblade’s sight at any point during the night— even when he tries to rest, one of them is there, occupying part of the room and quietly filling the space as they tend to other work. Running a country is hard, after all. If there’s anything Tommy can sympathize with the two, he knows that. And running a country plus the kingdom you just invaded? Tommy thinks he’d implode.

But the two seem to be handling it well. At some point, Tommy is curled up on a lounge sofa, eyes half-shut and dozing the best he can. Sleep brings nightmares, so he’s doing his best to avoid total unconsciousness at every turn. Philza is in the room with him, sitting across a table with maps and parchment around him, a quill in hand. He’s got his chin propped on one hand, and the candlelight flickering is the only thing to give life to the room until the door swings open and Technoblade gently nudges his way in.

He sets a mug of something steaming in front of the emperor, and then shuffles papers out of the way in order to set a small square of paper down in front of him. Tommy watches, the motions dragging him out of his quiet stupor.

“Techno—” Philza begins, sounding exasperated.

“It’s from your wife,” Technoblade says, voice low. He’s speaking in Northal again— not Common. Tommy blinks. Whatever this conversation is, perhaps it’s not meant for his ears. “Read it or we’re both dead when we return.”

“Mmm,” Philza hums, and Technoblade plants a hand on his head and nudges firmly, strands of loose gold threading through his fingers. “Enough with it,” he chides, reaching up to brush

the hair Technoblade had knocked loose out of the way as the letter in his hand crinkles.

“Never,” Technoblade informs him, and then moves to collapse on a seat nearby.

The scene is peaceful. Comfortable. It’s as if Tommy isn’t even there, an invisible observer to a moment of sincere... something. Comradery, maybe. It reminds him of quiet nights with his own best friend and advisor.

For the millionth time, Tommy wonders where Dream is now. The Continent is shrouded in darkness now, so wherever he is, Tommy hopes he’s getting his rest. There’s been no word about any advisors or captured parts of Tommy’s government— that, or Tommy has simply not been filled in. He knows there are things that the emperor is keeping from him regarding the situation in the Opus Isles and the Antarctic Empire. He’s a prisoner now, no matter how lavishly they treat him or how far they let his reins slack.

*You’d be better off paying more attention,* Dream’s voice whispers in his brain. He lets his eyes slip shut. *Sleeping and lazing around will do you no good if you don’t gain any information.*

“Is he asleep?” As if summoned, Technoblade’s voice rings across the room. It’s quiet— Tommy has to strain to hear it.

“That’s all he’s been doing,” Philza says absently. There’s the scratch of a quill against parchment. “I think it’s the stress.”

“You’re no doctor,” the general says. “But you’re also probably right.”

“I’m right about a lot of things.”

“Including letting him travel with us?”

Silence, and then a second later, “I’m doing what I think is best, Techno. Your input is always appreciated.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.” Technoblade’s voice lowers. “You’re being too soft. This is an avenue for weakness. If he gets it in his mind that he can overthrow us or somehow get his kingdom back in his hands— he’s a stubborn brat, you’ve seen him. I wouldn’t put it past his capabilities.”

“I know,” Philza says evenly. “But he’s also a child. One that I don’t think is at fault for most of the things his government has done. A clay figurehead.”

“Remoldable,” the general murmurs a second later, and Tommy does his best to keep his breathing even, his shoulders relaxed. He can feel the eyes on him. He hates it, how they burn. “I don’t see the chance of it happening.”

Dream. Dream. Dream, resting a soothing hand over his forehead. Him whispering that it’ll be alright. Something comforting, something calm, something for Tommy to latch onto. It’s pathetic, how he draws up the memory in order not to panic.

“Let’s wait and see how he responds to the capital,” Philza says quietly, and paper shuffles and folds. “Take this to the guards, will you? It’s for Kristin. If worst comes to worst, little King Thomas there will spend his days on Cormorant.”

“The island?” Technoblade hums, and his voice travels from the vicinity of Philza to the door. “Might be worth it. I’m not babysitting him.”

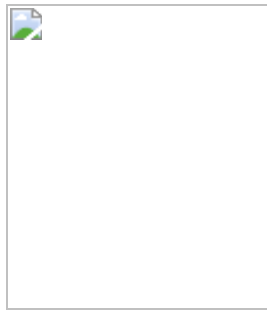
It takes every ounce of self-restraint in Tommy’s body not to jump up shouting at the insult. He seethes; he is not a baby he does not need to be *watched* – but Philza is responding, and he tries his best to get his annoyance under control.

“You won’t have to,” he promises, sounding vaguely amused. “Now go. I want a nap before we head out.”

“Sure thing,” Technoblade says, and then the door swings open and closed. Tommy lies there, fists clenched by his face and eyes squeezed shut. After a few minutes of silence (save for the sounds of quill on paper) he dares to open them again. Across the room, Philza raises his head to meet his eyes.

Face burning, Tommy squeezes them shut again. He casts a thought up to Prime: keep me safe.

Sleep does not come easy.



Tommy’s next few days are spent in what he likes to call the Most Boring State of his Life.

He’d never liked traveling. Tommy very much preferred the comforts of home, even before he’d been dragged away with his hands literally bound. The Opus Isles were familiar and comforting, and Caterwaul even more so. He knew every inch of the palace, every scent and breeze. He knew how the sunbeams fell on certain afternoons, the exact temperature his bedroom would get when the sun was at its highest. He knew the sound of rain on the great sloping roof and the echoing patter of it on the dome of the throne room. He knew where to go to avoid the guards and where to go to avoid Dream– he knew everything there was to know. Tommy Innit is an encyclopedia on his home, and he wears that badge with pride.

Up north, everything is different, and it is a damn shame.

The first real change that Tommy notices is when they stop for the second night of traveling after Helton. They’d been moving non-stop for nearly two full days straight, and after overhearing Technoblade’s hostility that night in the fort, he’d counted himself lucky that

he's still in the carriage with them. At least one of them, either the emperor or general, constantly by his side. Watching, he knows. They stop the second night in a small town near a tiny pond, men changing out horses and refilling water. Tommy's allowed to step outside for a brief moment and—

And the air is cold. He brings his arms up for warmth, fingers ghosting over the golden strands he's been wearing ever since his capture and subsequent demotion to prisoner in Caterwaul. He smells, surely— but they haven't taken the time to stop and bathe. No one has. It's almost comforting to know they're all as filthy as he is. His clothes are slightly ripped, and it just makes it that much more evident when his arms prickle with goosebumps, the night air actually cold on his cheeks.

“Welcome to the Empire,” General Technoblade says dismissively when he notices. The emperor is a touch more kind— he raises a hand, speaks to someone, and a few minutes later Tommy has a cloak wrapped around his shoulders. He wishes he had the mental fortitude to throw it off and refuse to wear it— the Empire blue leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Like vinegar, he swallows his pride as the temperature starts to dip more and more. But the chill is real and it sinks into his bones as they continue traveling. Sleeping in a carriage is less than ideal— but it's all they have as the days and nights seep into each other.

And Tommy is so fucking bored.

So, so, so fucking *incredibly* bored. It gets to the point on day three where he legitimately considers asking General Technoblade what his book is about. Or asking Emperor Philza for something to do— a deck of cards, a game, anything to pass the time more swiftly than just staring out at boring tundra and farmland for hours at a time. Occasionally, they pass a burnt-out shell of a village, or Philza leans and points out a crevasse four carriages long and three wide, the bottom of which cannot be seen.

“Remnants of the Cataclysm,” he says. “They're all over the countryside.” Tommy tries to spot them from then on, but as flat as they are, it's difficult to see them when they're more than twenty feet out from the road.

He tries to count trees, losing track at around twenty-six. His eyes get drawn elsewhere, and he nearly topples out of the carriage as they pass by a flock of sheep on the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” General Technoblade grunts, a firm hand on the back of his neck, dragging him back into the carriage with a gentle tug. “Close the window.”

Tommy doesn't dignify him with a response. No-one is more important than the idea of a warm fluffy, stinky sheep to sink one's hands into. The wool, dirty and coarse but so nice to sit with. Tommy had always liked sitting around in the animal pens back in Caterwaul— seeing them had always made his day, no matter how shitty it had been prior. He doesn't shut the window (Technoblade doesn't bother to scold him again— just leans back in his seat and sighs) instead hanging out of it and staring as the carriages plod on, leaving the sheep in the dust.

“You know,” Technoblade says after a moment. “I asked you to shut the window.”

“Shut up,” Tommy spits back, drawing his legs up to his chest and scowling deeply at him. The cold is nice across his face– the inside of the carriage gets so stifling at times.

“Don’t be rude, pup,” Technoblade says. “It’s unbecoming towards a host.”

“You’re not my host, you’re my captor,” Tommy points out, raising his voice in a slight mockery of Technoblade’s own. “And you don’t get to keep calling me that.” The nickname is a staunch reminder of everything he’s just lost– Dream’s hand in his hair, the fiery ring of Sapnap’s voice as they race down the palace hallways, the tickling hands that follow. Laughter, ringing across stone.

*(“I’m gonna get you, pup!”)*

“Don’t I?” The general shifts in place, tucking his fingers neatly against the open pages of his novel. Tommy wants to rip the damn book in half.

“No, you don’t,” Tommy insists, leaning forward as much as he can. General Technoblade blinks– for a moment, he looks startled. Tommy wants to relish in the victory. “It’s not for you to call me. It’s not. It doesn’t belong to you, it’s not– it’s not supposed to be mean, it’s supposed to be something *kind*, something *good*–” And oh, no, his eyes are very wet all of the sudden. He wants a sheep to bury his hands and face into. He wants Sapnap and his warm hands, able to produce the most colorful flames. He wants Dream. He wants to go home.

He leans back in his seat and does his best not to bawl. If he were of any sounder mind, he might be laughing at how bewildered and out-of-place the great General Technoblade looks. Instead he’s blinking back hot tears and struggling to settle his breathing. It takes a few minutes, but eventually he sticks his eyes on the view out the window and refuses to look at him again.

At some point, Technoblade raps on the wall of the carriage and they lull to a stop. He exits, and for a brief, glorious moment, Tommy is alone.

Then the emperor appears in the doorway and sits with a flourish. His cloak has been exchanged out for something shorter, more suitable for riding and traveling. There is mud on it. There is mud on his boots and trousers, all the way up to his knees. Tommy snickers and does not try to hide it.

“We’ll need to get you a change of clothes sooner than later,” the emperor says by way of greeting. “How are things?”

“Fuck off,” Tommy says lyrically. The emperor just sighs and smiles, although it’s a bit forced.

“You’re in a bad mood,” he offers after a second. “You and Techno both. The road will do that to you, I suppose.”

“You are not helping,” Tommy informs him. The emperor just laughs, a broad-chested, full-body thing that strangely makes Tommy want to laugh *with* him despite the aching hatred in his chest.

“I see.” The man straightens up and smiles again, but this time it’s a bit more genuine from what Tommy can tell. “Is there any way I can help?”

“Let me go home.”

“That’s not on the table. Something lesser.”

“Home.”

“I just said– look. Is there anything you want right now? That I could possibly provide?”

Something to do, Tommy’s brain screams. Something to drive away the boredom. Take me home, give me something that reminds me of home, cover me in blue so I never have to think of home again. Make the hurt go away.

All he ends up saying is: “I want to pet a sheep.”

It’s clear Philza has not expected this. He blinks. Tommy considers it the second small win of the day– first Technoblade, now the emperor? He’s on a roll.

“A sheep?” The emperor glances out the window. “You want to... pet a sheep?”

“Yes.” Tommy nods.

Philza blinks again. He looks genuinely surprised and Tommy holds back a grin.

“Alright,” he concedes a minute later. “We can probably do that.”

Twenty minutes later, they are standing in the middle of a field. In the Isles, the grass is as high as one’s shoulder– Tommy can sink into it and find the bird trails, find the places in between where creatures live. Here, the stuff only comes up to his ankle. It’s tough when he steps on it, pressing his heel into the soil and feeling little give underneath. Technoblade is behind him– the world stretches out before him, and there is a sheep.

It’s a sheep. It’s got a thick layer of wool, belly covered in dirt. The emperor of the Antarctic Empire is holding the rope he led it here on, and he is smiling.

“I found us a sheep,” he says, gesturing towards the farmhouse in the distance. Tommy takes a step forward, then two when he’s not held back. Then three, and then he’s on the ground next to the sheep and raising his hands to its neck. It sits there– a happy little thing, not a thought behind it’s eyes. She’s the most beautiful creature Tommy has ever laid eyes on.

“Hello,” he says quietly, privately. Just for them. “Nice to meet you.” He lowers his hands and scrabbles at the grass beneath them both, pulling up a piece and holding it to her mouth. Happily, she inhales the thing and Tommy holds back a grin as she (and he’s decided it’s a she, no matter what) licks at his hand, eager for more. “I wish I could,” he tells her quietly, lifting his hands to scratch at her neck. His fingers find the rope there, the one tying her to the emperor’s hand. “I see we are similarly trapped. Lucky you get to go home after this.”



The sheep lifts her head and stares. Tommy smiles for a second, burying his hands in her wool and leaning in. She smells horrid. It's the best thing he's done in weeks. From here, face pressed to her neck, he can pretend he's at home. Safe, tucked away hidden in the barnyard of the palace as the monsoons roll in and the breeze chills the back of his neck. Dream is looking for him, probably. Time to go inside and get back to lessons, or meetings, or something similarly boring. Tommy would rather stay here forever with the sheep, deep in the hay that's the same color of his hair.

"Thomas," someone says. It's the emperor, and his voice is the kindest he's heard yet. "Time to go."

"Not yet," he asks. "Please."

"Thomas."

"Please. Just a second—" Just a second longer to pretend, to wish and hope it was all a bad dream. His fingers scrabble for the wool at her neck, coarse and grounding against his hands as someone pulls him back and away. "No, no no no—"

"Come on, pup," comes Technoblade's tired voice. "The river will freeze with or without us there."

"I don't want to," Tommy says, and goddammit he will fight for this kicking and screaming. "Another minute, another minute, just let me fucking—"

"Techno." The emperor is quiet. "Let him down. Another minute."

The hand on his shoulder releases, and Tommy stumbles back down to his knees and buries his head in the shoulder of a sheep he barely knows. Anything for a moment longer.

He gets a minute and not a second more.

Later, as they walk towards the carriage waiting on the road, the promise of a boring ride ahead, Philza turns to him and asks, "is there anything else?"

Tommy inhales, exhales, and pretends he's not on the verge of tears.

"Your good general's book," he demands.

"Yeah, I don't think so," the emperor laughs. Technoblade stammers.

It's a nice laugh. Tommy almost joins in.



## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

another one bites the dust! sheep. the sheep's name is. watson. i think. yes. it's name is watson :D

and so forth we travel onwards, towards the empire proper..... i'm so excited to introduce you all! let me know what you think so far in the comments!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

if you're enjoying, be sure to subscribe to both the story and me on ao3 :) i post cool stuff and do cool things. also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

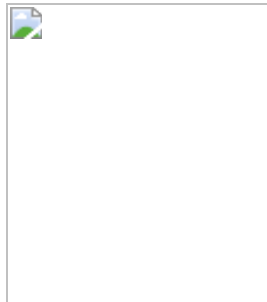
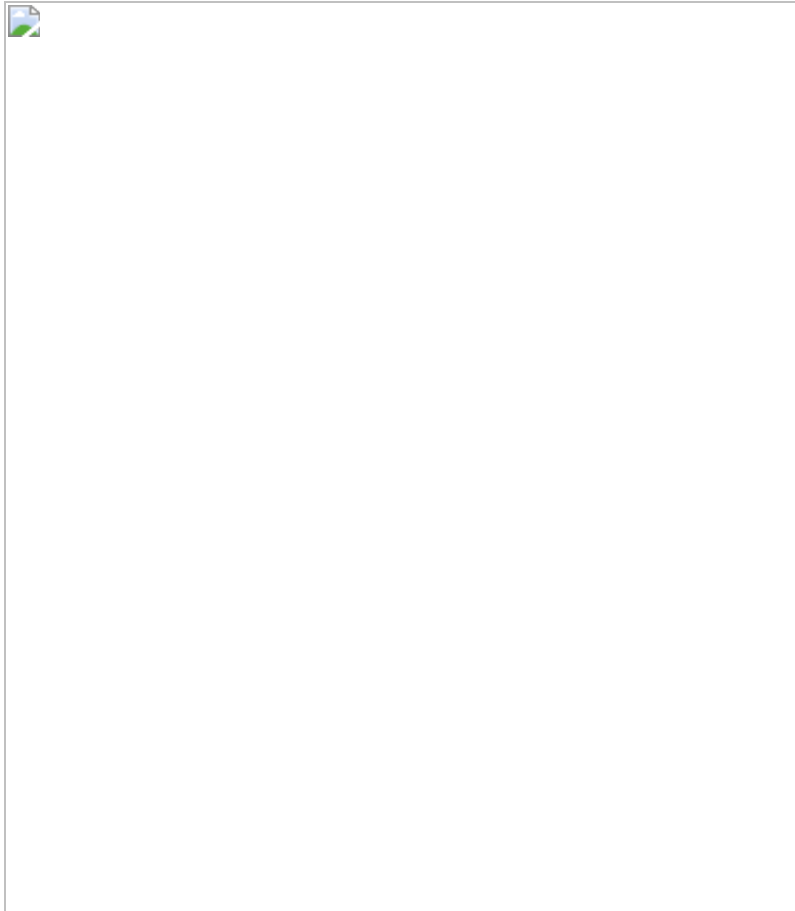
# **arc I. - and i need to save you, but who will save me?**

## Chapter Summary

TW / mentions of death & starvation

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The Empire is everything and nothing like Tommy expected it to be.

Their travels had come to something resembling an end, finally. Over the river Kirnach and past tiny towns and settlements, a march of soldiers and kings. They'd been ferried over the river— Tommy had realized then what Technoblade meant when he said the river freezes with or without you. He had clutched the sides of the raft like maybe it'd keep him from drowning if it flipped— the currents were rough, but the ferryman propelled them with ease to the other shore. Tommy's introduction to the Kirnach is one of whitecaps and leaping fish.

"Cousins to the great flying fish," the old ferryman had said, leaning in close with his stinking breath and squinty eye. Tommy had done his best not to lean backwards and away— Technoblade was behind him, and that would be just awkward. "The ones to the west. They say in that new kingdom of theirs they fry them up on sticks and eat them whole."

"Do they?" Tommy wheezes. It's hard to hear over the sound of rushing water, but the ferryman just grins and pulls away to keep steering. When they reach the other shore, Philza's hand is steady on his shoulder as they wait for the carriage to be brought over on a ferry ride of its own.

"They do eat great fish in Libra," Philza says as they wait. An answer to Tommy's question at last— even if it's not a question he particularly cares about. "Have you ever been?"

Tommy thinks of the kingdom, heralded as mysterious by outsiders. Revealed only to the world fourteen years ago when the earth cracked and mountains fell.

"No," he says. "I have eaten fish, though. Lots of fish."

"Then you're not missing much," Philza says. "Once you've had one fish, you've had it all."

"That's not true." Tommy frowns, turning back towards the river. "Salmon tastes different from carp. Or cod. You just have bad taste buds. I think I'd like to try flying fish."

He thinks of Libra and it's mountains, the flying fish and great serpents in the water nearby. A different haven than home, but maybe still a haven. Better than the cold rushing waters of the Kirnach. Better than the Empire. Anywhere is better than the Empire.

After the river comes the mountains. Peaks rising in the distance, leagues higher than the tops of spruce trees and small farmhouses. They pass a military encampment at the base of them— the road starting to slope upwards, soldiers milling about dressed in fuzzy fatigues. A set of gloves is added to his wardrobe to compliment the cloak Philza insists he wears; they're blue, delicate embroidery around the wrists and up the back of his hands. Chrysanthemums.

Tommy does his best to ignore the symbolism when he can. The North Ridges— Nordyrsgn, General Technoblade tells him, are some of the tallest peaks on the Continent. Tommy can't remember the last time he saw them, if ever. The temperature drops as they climb higher, and piles of snow and ice begin to appear. On one of their stops, Philza lets him step out of the carriage for a few minutes and mess around in the stuff. It's delightfully cold, clinging to his bare fingertips when he strips the gloves off and shoves his hands in it. By the time he clambers back into the carriage, his cheeks burn with warmth and his fingers are stiff.

"That's what the gloves are for, you know," Philza says with a slight smile. "Have you never seen snow?"

“No,” Tommy shakes his head. “Maybe once, when I was really, really little. But it only ever rained.”

“Shame,” Technoblade says dryly. “Snow’s a pleasure.”

“He hates it,” Philza says, leaning in with a mischievous smile. “He only tolerates it for me.”

Tommy glances over at Technoblade, tipping his head slightly as he does. His fingers are warming up now, in the heat of the cabin, alight with lantern flame and their combined body heat. “Maybe he should get a mind of his own,” Tommy says. “Go hang out anywhere else but here. Leave me alone, maybe. And you.”

“Not happening,” the general says, glancing up and between the two of them. “I’ve known Philza longer than you’ve been alive.”

“Longer than my reign, even—”

“By a week. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“You two are boring,” Tommy proclaims, leaning back in his seat and resting his head against the side of the carriage. It bumps and bangs as the carriage jolts along, but the mild sting of pain is grounding. He can almost imagine music to the movement— that’s a game that might be worth playing, later. “Old men are boring. Who knew?”

“Don’t be a brat,” Technoblade says smoothly. Tommy sticks his tongue out— childish, but worth the affronted look he gets in return.

Craggy rocks rise in sharp shards of earth around them, and slowly, the carriage plods on. Soldiers march beside them in formation, and Tommy watches as the mountains turn from purpley distant shapes into looming monsters, into the very landscape around them. Nordryggn, with sparse groups of pine trees and snow that gathers on the ground in great piles. At one point, wind whips through the valley they’re in and the carriage rocks so violently that Tommy nearly finds himself on the floor. Philza and Technoblade both leave the carriage after that, and for a blessed few minutes he’s alone. Still guarded, but the carriage is silent except for his own clouded breaths and the sound of wind and chatter outside. Then Technoblade climbs back in, coated in a light layer of snow and ice and looking distinctly grumpy. Tommy pushes down the urge to tease.

At some point during the journey, Philza finally hands Tommy something to do. A deck of playing cards, edges worn down. He stubbornly sets out a game of solitaire, played by his own rules, of course— Tommy doesn’t know the real ones) and passes the time balancing cards on the seats of the carriage, stubbornly ignoring the two men on the other side of the cramped space. That is, until—

“There we are,” Philza says, leaning forward to peer out the windows. Technoblade glances up— Tommy does as well. “Familiar sights.”

Maybe for them. But it’s all brand new to Tommy, in the most terrifying way. He practically throws himself towards the carriage windows, bracing his arms on the sill and scattering

playing cards as he goes. The mountains have parted around them— the road they're traveling on stretching out beyond, ending on the shores of... a lake. A sizable lake, frosted over on the edges and surrounded by trees on their end. The water reflects the visage of the mountains and trees around it, settling into a deep blue at the center. Tommy stares as they get closer and closer, a small boathouse on the edges and a dock appearing when they round a corner. More of the lake comes into view— and Tommy has to take a moment.

There's a town on the other side of the lake.

Mountains rise high above, a skyline above the city. Wooden roofs topped with snow draw in his gaze, docks stretching out into the lake and boats lining their edges. The water of the lake is not yet frozen, but as they approach the banks Tommy can definitely spot frost.

The emperor and general are talking behind him, but Tommy pays no mind. This is Osprey— if he had thought Logstead or Helton had been his last chance of freedom, maybe this is his true chance. Or at least, *a* chance. Osprey seems to be a large city— there's a clocktower in the center, rising high above the other buildings. An Empire flag flies from the top of it, large and blue.

"Pup," Technoblade says, and that draws Tommy's attention at last. He turns. The two men are looking at him— the general faintly annoyed, Philza in a constant state of wicked amusement. "Time to go. Gather up the cards."

"My hands are tied," Tommy shoots back, holding them up. "Literally. Bitch. You pick them up."

General Technoblade only gives him a look, before shifting his weight and opening the door. He leaves, the carriage lifting slightly with his absence. One of the cards on the floor has a footprint. Tommy stares at it forlornly.

"Five minutes," Philza says, still with that wispy smile. "I'll come get you in five minutes."

Then he leaves as well. Tommy is alone with a scattered set of cards and bound hands.

He counts to sixty, then goes about picking up the card set. He's not going to just leave them there— not when he knows there's still travel ahead of them that will surely end up being just as boring as the past few days have been. Even without full use of his hands he manages to shuffle them into something regarding a deck, but he is missing one— counting the cards leads him to 53, not 54.

"I'm missing a joker," he tells Philza when the man comes back for him, tucking the deck into a pocket. The emperor nods.

"We'll keep an eye out," he promises, and then they leave the carriage behind.

To get to Osprey means another boat ride. This is one less treacherous than the last— the lake is still, and the boat is larger than the one that took them across the angry Kernach. It has a

central mast, one that rises high into the sky and kisses the clouds. Tommy stands by it as men march on and off the boat, horses passing by and orders being shouted every which way. The air is chilly and his nose is frozen within five minutes, hands pressed together after weaseling their way into gloves. General Technoblade finds his place by Tommy's side sooner than later, and then the shipmaster is pushing them off the banks and away they go. Tommy stays by the mast— he's familiar with ships, achingly so. He'd ridden down the river from Caterwaul to the harbors more than a hundred times, watched them bring in shipments of fish and trade just as much. It's nice to be back on a boat, as fleeting as this journey is.

Osprey's lake is wide, but not long. The docks grow closer within an hour, and Tommy watches as the clocktower looms. Eventually they are tied up at the shipyard, and the whole city is apparently watching. People crowd the streets, sitting on boxes and cheering peppering the normal chatter of life. Flags are pouring from every window— it is now that Tommy realizes he's witnessing the people celebrate. This war is a victory for them, not a loss. There is no aching hole in the center of any of their chests, no crushing guilt, no terrible feelings of sadness and loss. They are happy.

Tommy is jealous for a brief moment. This win could've been his, had he just made the right decisions. It fills him up, threatening to spill out from his eyes and mouth and nose— this could've been his people celebrating, golden flags in windows as they laughed and cheered.

But it's not. All he sees is blue as a hand on his shoulder guides him through the streets, people gaping with open mouths as their Emperor and General parade through the streets with a convoy of soldiers (and between it all, whispers of a boy wearing gold).

They arrive at a large building, made of stone instead of the surrounding wood, and Philza gently ushers him inside.

"Jabber," he's saying over Tommy's shoulder, as Tommy arches his neck and cranes his head to stare up at the painted ceiling. It's elegant— dragons swoop around the sides, clouds dotting the ceiling and Prime and Channel back-to-back in the center. A church then; or, a mix of both as official-looking people rush in circles around them all. "Stay with Thomas. I need to get things settled in for the night and get a carriage for them in the morning. Technoblade is finagling the situation with the soldiers here— it's been overrun, hasn't it? Yeah, I thought so. Thomas." Tommy tips his head away from staring at the ceiling to look at him. He's smiling again— sideways, a bit mischievous. "No trouble."

"You can't tell me what to do," Tommy tells him. Philza laughs, and Tommy ducks to avoid his hand as he reaches out to pat him on the head. "Fuck off."

"You're really making me deal with this?" The soldier— Jabber, Philza had called them— asks, and the emperor just smiles a bit wider.

"No trouble," he reiterates, and then heads off across the marble floors. Tommy watches him go, then turns to Jabber and eyes them up and down. There's a badge on their lapel, marking them as more than a foot soldier. They're watching Tommy with a careful eye, like he might bolt at any moment. Which, to be fair, he may.

"Fuck you," Tommy says primly to them. They raise an eyebrow.

“Classy,” they say. “I see how you get along with them.”

“We don’t get along,” Tommy says back. He holds his arms up, shakes them a bit. “Look at me.”

“I’m looking,” Jabber says, and the laughter is evident in their tone. Tommy wishes he was tall enough to headbutt them in the goddamn face. “I can very clearly see your sorrowful situation. Come on— Philza had us prepare rooms for you all tonight.”

“Rooms?” Tommy has to skip to keep up. He’s going to run, don’t get him wrong, but information about the city would be valuable. “What is this place?”

“The embassy,” Jabber tells him, swiftly heading down a side hall and out of the main room. The voices fade to background chatter, but they’re still in sight of too many soldiers. Tommy waits. “Osprey is a trade hub. I’m sure you know the history.”

“Right,” Tommy says, dragging his foot against the marble floor beneath them. “After the Cataclysm, the capital moved from here to Raven’s Flight. ‘Cause it was safer.”

“Less mountains to crumble down on your population,” Jabber says wryly, turning and wiggling their fingers in a sad mimicry of a landslide. Tommy remembers hearing about it—how when the land shook, it took half of Osprey with it.

“Sure,” Tommy says, pausing as Jabber waits for a reaction towards their dramatics. He makes no move, and so they continue forward until the sounds from the main room are practically gone.

“Here we are,” Jabber says a moment later, gesturing to a door. “You’ll wait here until his Majesty and the General return to fetch you.” They reach out, opening the door (Tommy notices the lock— it’s heavy, a big metal thing on the outside) and gives his shoulder a small nudge.

There are no windows. A lock bigger than his fist, no windows to crawl out of, not even a hearth to keep him warm. Tommy turns slightly, pausing his steps before he can truly be pushed inside.

Now’s a chance, and he has to take it.

“Wait,” he says, and Jabber pauses, just for a moment—

—and Tommy leans up on his tiptoes, ducking his head forward as though he’s trying to hit the soldier. Jabber leans backwards, eyes widening and hands reaching out, but Tommy’s already moving. Ducking under their arms and slamming his shoulder into their side, nearly sending them both tumbling. Thankfully, he keeps on his feet, and as Jabber shouts and regains their balance he bolts down the hallway.

No trouble, Philza’s voice echoes through his head, and Tommy can’t do anything but grin. He heads further into the embassy building, away from the main room as feet begin to patter



behind him. He's got no use of his hands and his breath is already coming hard, a nervous laugh tearing itself from his chest.

Down the hall, a sharp left, down another hall. He can hear shouting and glances up—

There's a window, cracked open to let in the air. It's small, and higher than Tommy's head, but he's small for his age. In one movement, he throws his arms up and grasps the windowsill. Drags his body up, a leg over the edge— then leans too far to the side and thuds onto the ground outside. Pain blooms over his chest as he tumbles to the stones, and he wheezes for a second before curling into a ball. Voices clamor through the window— yet no one looks out, no one peers down at him and shouts.

They move on, and despite the general panic in the air, Tommy can't hear anyone after a moment.

He lies on the ground of the small street he's in and breathes.

It's cold. The stone is chilly against his forehead and he takes a minute to regain his breath, knees to his chest and hands (still bound) tucked close to his face. It's a wonder he didn't crack his head on the cobble, and after a minute or two of recovery, he pushes himself up.

Thankfully, the tiny street is empty. It's more alley than street, and Tommy knows he needs to get away— find something sharp on the ground, or a piece of twisted metal to get the binds off. This is his most successful escape attempt yet, and he is not going to let it go to waste. It takes only a few minutes of searching around the alley to find a well-placed snapped bit of iron.

“Thank you,” Tommy whispers to Lady Prime, since she's clearly watching over him enough to grant him this small mercy. Even if the rest of Her plan is kind of shit right now. He hangs onto it, twisting the metal in his fingers until it's wedged firmly enough to start sawing.

Rubbing phantom ropes from his wrists, Tommy pulls off his gloves and wrings his hands together. Then looks down at them and his clothing, and pulls them back on. Everyone will be looking for a blond boy in gold— his gaze lands on a puddle a few feet away.

No one will be looking for a brunette in blue.

It smears mud down his cheeks and face, dripping wet into his eyes, but it's better than the previously fluffy curls he'd been sporting before. The puddle serves a second use— a mirror, one for him to peer into. He does not recognize the reflection.

Tommy ignores how it makes him want to cry, but that's alright. He tugs the cloak given to him by the emperor more firmly around his shoulders, takes a breath, and then slips into the main streets.

It's crowded. They're busy, people scattered and bumbling each way. No one is parting for him now that he's not by the emperor's side, no soldiers with their hands on his shoulders. He's just a street brat now, hunching his shoulders and hoping his thin cheeks hide any resemblance to the kid who just made his way through the streets.

It's a party. Literally— people push past and vendors shout, children laughing with ribbons and lanterns in hand. There are drinks splashing and lights dancing across the way, the thick smell of every type of food imaginable permeating the air. The city is alive, and Tommy is so alone.

The smell of food does make his stomach grumble, though. He tugs his cloak around his middle and ducks through the crowd, eyes on various stalls. Some of it he recognizes, some of it he doesn't— the prices are ridiculous, though. When he looks around, everyone is gaunt to some degree.

The famine. He'd known about it, of course. His own people were on rations. After the Cataclysm had changed the very landscape around them, food had been hard to come by. The aftermath had been long and hard, the winters bone-chillingly cold and the animals had changed their patterns. It had taken years for the Isles to find the new spots for fishing, for the lands to be re-plowed and people to start to heal, finally. The Isles were lucky, all things considered. In places like the Vaults, with their already limited food supply, people had begun to drop like flies despite relief efforts. Population tanked.

He hadn't known it had been this bad in the Empire. Despite the party going on around him, Tommy finds his gaze landing on more than a few unmoving bodies slumped in corners. Stick-thin and wrapped in cloth to fight off the chill they no longer felt. The celebratory nature of the crowd is painting a pretty blue and white picture over some sickly grey core of the country— Tommy's not stupid. He can see tragedy where it so clearly lies.

He shivers, and marches on. Kids with pale hair and eyes dance around him, laughing, and someone shouts. He glances back— soldiers, marching his way but not yet looking at him.

Time to go. He follows the kids— boots pounding against the cobble as they dart this way and that. Tommy snags a ribbon out of a smaller boy's hand and then runs before he can cry— it pains him, but he has to do something. Something to fit in.

"Hey!" Someone cries, and he stiffens, but all that happens is a woman in blue grins. She's covered in flowers— chrysanthemums. "Come here, boy!" When he pauses just long enough, her hands find his dirty hair and tucks a few petals into the space behind his ear. "Praise the king," she says quietly, in thickly accented Northal. "Good times will be upon us soon."

"Yes," Tommy forces himself to say, as she continues to laden flowers on his head. "Good times."

"Be happy!" She cries out as he stumbles away and back into the crowds. "Prime be with you!"

"Prime be with me," he mutters, mostly to himself, ducking away and around. There's a junction up ahead where the street widens and the crowd is a bit thinner— he aims for that area, instead of the thick crowds of the side streets. Bright color catches his eye and he pauses for a moment, swinging himself to the side and glancing at the orange and yellow. Banners decorate a small stand, the brightest colors he's seen this side of the border.

The stand is small, but crowded with children. Tommy slips into the mass of them, probably around ten or so, and stares. In the back is a man with a tub full of water, and cradled in his hands is a large fish. Bright orange, with bulbous eyes and fins.

“Try your hand,” he’s offering, nets balanced across his knee. He lets the fish in his hand go, letting it swim away for a moment before reaching out to catch it again. “If you can catch it, you can keep it!”

Tommy watches a moment more, then swallows and slips away. Down the street, to the square. The clocktower rises high into the sky, clouds dusting the tip of it. They’re in the mountains— the very air is thin. He has to stop not a second later, leaning against the wooden side of a building and breathing hard, tucking the ribbon into his pocket.

“Hungry?” A voice cuts through the clamor and he turns slightly, a girl probably no older than him smiling and holding out a bowl. It’s got two spoons in it— half eaten already by the looks of it. She’s got brown hair cut to a bob, flowers decorating her neck.

“Oh,” Tommy says, leaning backwards a bit. “Uh.”

“Come on,” she says. “It’s a day to celebrate. His Majesty’s home, and the war with the Isles is over. I don’t mind sharing with a scrawny thing like you.” With a grin, she reaches out and tweaks his nose. Tommy ducks his head, batting her hand with the slightest of laughs.

“Hey,” he says, and his stomach is growling and she is watching him expectantly.

That’s how he finds himself sitting on the balcony of a tavern, legs swinging as the flow of people whirl and toss underneath them.

“I’m Clara,” she offers.

“Like Our Lady?” He asks. She nods, hair bouncing. He spoons another mouthful of soup into his mouth— it’s good, if not a little salty and watery.

“Exactly,” she says. “My mum— she owns the tavern— she wanted me to be holy. I think I disappoint her.”

“I know the feeling,” Tommy nods, thinking back to sharp words from Dream after disastrous meetings. “I like it though. I think you’re nice.”

“Of course you do,” she says, lifting her nose up for a moment. “I’m feeding you. Like a stray cat. My mum says you get paid back for the kindness you show.”

“And you talk about your mum a lot,” Tommy informs her.

“Well of course!” Clara grins. “Who doesn’t?”

“I don’t,” Tommy says.

“Well, where is your mum?”

“Dead.”

“Oh.” Clara winces. “Should’ve seen that coming. Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Tommy slurps the soup, picking a leaf of something out from between his teeth. It’s easy to lose his manners when he’s not being watched by anyone– more so now that he’s got dirt coating his face to boot. “I never knew her.”

“Still, sorry,” Clara apologizes. She leans forward, arms against the railing of the balcony, and Tommy watches as she watches the people below. “You’ve got a funny accent, did you know?”

“I’m used to speaking Common,” Tommy admits, tipping his head slightly. “I’ve been... traveling.”

“Right,” Clara says, turning to look at him once more and grinning. It’s lopsided– it reminds Tommy of the emperor himself and his mischievous grin. “Refugee?”

“Something like that.”

They fall into silence, Tommy spooning soup into his mouth every once and a while. They pass the bowl back and forth, until they’re scraping the bottom of it. Tommy stares out over the rooftops as Clara finishes the dregs of it, fingers twisting and then coming up to brush away a damp strand of his hair. Across town, flags fly from masts.

“Are the boats the only way over?” Tommy asks. “The lake?”

“Sure,” Clara says. “Unless you want to spend a few days walking around.”

“Could I sneak on one, you think?”

“Where are you trying to go?” Her eyes are sharp when she asks. “Osprey’s about to get a whole lot of trade. It’s good to stay here. Or at least, that’s what my mum said.”

“South,” Tommy admits. “To the Isles.”

“...not sure why you’d want to go there,” Clara says after a second. “They’re selfish, you know. Hoard food and shit. Get fat on bread and butter and sugar, especially the king and his palace folk.”

“That’s not true,” Tommy says, a scowl deepening on his face. “They’re rationing food right now.”

“Yeah?” Clara snorts. “How would you know?”

*Because I’m the one who signed the ration order,* Tommy wants to say. All that comes out is a stammering, “I– I don’t know, I just *do* .”

Clara laughs again. It’s sharper, meaner. Tommy finds he doesn’t like it as much as he did a few minutes ago. “Sure,” she says. Tommy scrambles up from his seat, getting his feet under

him and swaying for a moment as his stomach sloshes, full of warmth. “Hey! Where are you going?”

“To the docks,” Tommy says, turning away from Clara and her cruel words. “I need to go south.”

“Hey!” She’s shouting now, even as Tommy retraces their footsteps, flying down a steep staircase and past sticky barstools, past a kind-looking woman with the same color eyes as Clara, out the door and past the Empire’s flag hanging from their front windows. He shoves through the street, ignoring her high-pitched calls of *hey kid! Kid! Come back!*

He’d seen the docks over the rooftops. All he has to do is get there.

He darts down a few different streets, eyeing the houses around him and trying to figure out where he is based on the view he’d had a moment ago. He spins for a second, squinting at signs and flags and ignoring any disgruntled voices as he bumps into people. Spinning, searching, and there— just above the other houses, opposite the clocktower. Masts and flags. Boats.

He turns, and slams right into someone’s chest.

“Sorry,” he breathes out, pushing backwards and tugging his cloak more firmly around his shoulders. Brushes himself off down the front, and glances up.

General Technoblade stares back.

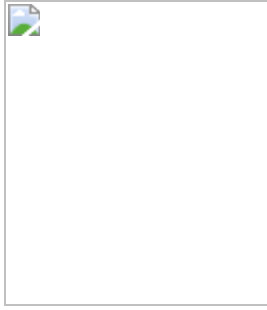
Tommy freezes. Then takes a step back. Then two more. Then, three. Technoblade only watches, a cold kind of calm spread over his features. He doesn’t even look angry, and that’s what frightens Tommy most. He takes one last step backwards and tenses to turn and run— only to bump into another warm body behind him. This one is also clad in armor, and when he turns, there’s practically a whole army behind him.

“Fuck,” he says quietly. A hand lands on his shoulder, but Tommy *refuses*. No. He’s not doing this again, not like the time in the tent, or the field, or the second field, or— no. He’s not going back. He refuses. He wants to go home.

“Pup,” Technoblade says, a low drawl. “Have fun?”

“No,” Tommy says, and he wrestles his way out of the man’s grasp, slithering through a soldier’s hand and ducking under another. “No, no, fuck you!”

In the end, Technoblade carries him back kicking and screaming. He shouts obscenities the whole way. At some point, he swears he sees Clara in the crowd, watching with wide eyes that narrow in disgust when she realizes. He tries not to let it hurt— it does anyways, and he hopes the bruises he leaves on Technoblade’s shoulders show it.



The embassy is emptier than before. Tommy's escorted by the general and a dozen soldiers down too many hallways and doors to count, up a flight of stairs. At some point, Technoblade swings him off his shoulder, settling him on the ground as they keep walking.

The door they stop at is dark. Rich with carvings, dragons and birds. Tommy already knows who lies behind it.

Philza looks up from the table, eyes narrowed slightly, and they widen only a fraction when they see the state of him. Tommy's at least a little proud of that— he knows he's filthy, the cloak he'd been given is muddy, the gloves equally so. He's stained the perfect white embroidery for sure, and it's a vicious kind of vindictiveness that curls in his gut.

"Well," Philza says, the doors slamming shut behind them. Technoblade's hand is still on his shoulder. "Did you have fun, mate?"

"Die," Tommy says. Philza sighs.

"I was hoping you'd be done with it after last time," he says quietly, then pushes up from his seat off the table. "Especially here— you know we have a thousand soldiers in the city at the moment? How on earth did you think you would sneak away?"

"I'd walk if I had to," Tommy says, sticking his nose up as the emperor comes forward, studying his face with a strange, closed-off look. "All the way home, so I don't have to look at your ugly faces any longer than I have to."

"We let him roam for a bit," Technoblade says, cutting him off slightly. "Once he started heading for the docks, we cut him off."

"What?" Tommy whirls. "You knew where I was the whole time?"

"Pretty much," Technoblade says, chin dipped down to meet his eyes. "You're not exactly the pinnacle of stealth."

"Fuck you," Tommy spits. "I'm stealthy as shit."

"Right," Technoblade says. There's none of the amusement he'd had in days prior. Just an icy calculation. Tommy holds his gaze for a second, then flicks his eyes back to Philza. Neither of them are offering warmth right now.

"Thomas," the emperor says. "I'm glad you got to see some of this town. But my patience is running thin. You are a prisoner of the empire— this is not a game."

“And I’m not treating it like one!” Tommy fires back. “It’s my fucking life! I– I’m the one who’s dealing with it right now, and it’s– of course it’s not a game!”

“Then you’ll understand that my mercy has a limit.” Philza grins, and it’s all teeth. “I have a kingdom to think of, above your comfort. I have been incredibly kind to you–”

“Against all advice,” Technoblade mutters.

“–so I’d think carefully before you continue with this behavior. Your freedom is a privilege, now. Something that we can take from you at will. Technoblade allowed you to get as far as you did just now– it was not due to any skill you might have.” Philza turns, taking a few steps back to the long table sitting in the room, and then glances back. Tommy seethes, but bites his tongue. Literally. Iron bleeds out over his teeth as he stands there, hands clasped fiercely behind his back. “Be wary with every fucking step you take, child. I did not keep this throne for as long as I have because I am kind.”

Silence stretches between them. Tommy practically vibrates with anger and upset and worst of all– shame. None of that temporary freedom had even been freedom at all. He’d been a fish in a bucket, briefly let go but still caged within his captor’s careful fingers. All that work and adrenaline for a mere illusion of hope.

“Understand?” Technoblade murmurs.

Through gritted teeth, Tommy says, “yes.”

“Yes...?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t elaborate, and refuses to bow his head. It’s disrespectful as fuck, but Tommy had never claimed to respect either of them. He’s not about to start now. The least they can know is that he hates them, with his entire chest.

“Then goodnight,” Philza says, lifting a hand to wave them both off. “Get him out of here, Techno. Please.”

He’s escorted out without so much as another look from the man. For what feels like the thousandth time, Technoblade’s hand is on his shoulder and they make their way down the hall, back to a familiar-looking door with a heavy duty lock on the outside.

“No funny business,” Technoblade says as he opens the monstrous thing. Around them are still a dozen soldiers, in easy formation around them. He wants to run again, aches to feel his feet pound against the floor and hear the whoop of air in his chest, but something about the emperor’s eyes had given him true pause at the thought. “I’ll come retrieve you mid-morning tomorrow.”

“Why?” Tommy digs his heels in as Technoblade turns, gesturing for him to enter his new cell. Gone is the carriage, now he’ll be staring at blue and white wallpapered walls for the next two dozen hours.

“So we can leave,” Technoblade says. “The capital. Stop asking questions.”

“Stop answering and I’ll stop asking,” Tommy taunts, still resisting a bit. “Is his Majesty coming with us?”

“Get in and shut up,” Technoblade advises. “Or I’ll get a runekeeper and you’ll wake up when we get there.”

Tommy snaps his mouth shut. There’s nothing worse than a dose of a runekeeper’s weakness. The sleep is never peaceful, and he’d had enough for his whole lifetime that first day with them in Caterwaul. It’s a miracle they haven’t drugged him the whole way here— he thanks Prime for the little things. After a few seconds of standoff with Technoblade, he steps forward and into the room.

The door swings shut behind him. No parting quips, no begrudgingly amused shake of the head. Just the door and the heavy click of the lock as it binds, leaving him alone. There are no windows. The hearth is cold, the chimney blocked up. Tommy scours every corner of the place to find it barren save for a lounge and a rug.

He’s glad now he kept the playing cards. They do little to remove the bad taste of fear from his mouth, but they’re a distraction.



Tommy leaves Osprey, and rumors of his presence there spread like fine wine on an expensive carpet. Blood red on cream, by the time they leave the next morning there is a crowd of people waiting— all of them there just to shout insults at the carriage Tommy climbs into. His hands are bound again. Instead of rope this time, the emperor has apparently deemed him worthy of chains.

They’re heavy. They drag him down with each footstep, and Tommy’s tempted to throw himself in the lake and let himself sink to the bottom. Maybe it’ll be quiet. Maybe there, he won’t have to hear the hurtful words thrown his way by angry, gaunt citizens. Maybe there, Technoblade won’t give him the silent treatment as he sits across from Tommy in their small carriage as they pull out of town.

Tommy keeps quiet as they leave, watching through the curtains as the view turns from habited to sparse houses to trees and frosted tundra. They’re headed due north— following the Nordryggn until the ridge to the east falls away, and there it is. Crow’s Chasm, a valley between mountains, a field of rough grass and about as wide as Lake Lake. It takes a full day for them to cross it, and night is falling by the time Tommy gets a good look at the Empire’s capital.

Raven’s Flight, in all her glory.



Basalt walls climb high into the cliffside on the northernmost edge of Crow's Chasm, layered like the tiers of a cake. A jutting roost pokes out through the middle of the city, and from here Tommy can already spot the pinpricks of light that thread through the streets and homes, spilling out onto the plains below. It's magnificent. It takes his breath away. It's nothing like home, and his heart aches.

This is the farthest Tommy has ever been from the Isles. The idea that he might never go back is terrifying.

After a day and a half of silence, Technoblade finally speaks to him. They're approaching the city quicker than Tommy's ready for— at the top of it, a palace resembling a fortress, or perhaps a stronghold. The most secure place in the north. To Tommy, it looks more like a prison than a castle.

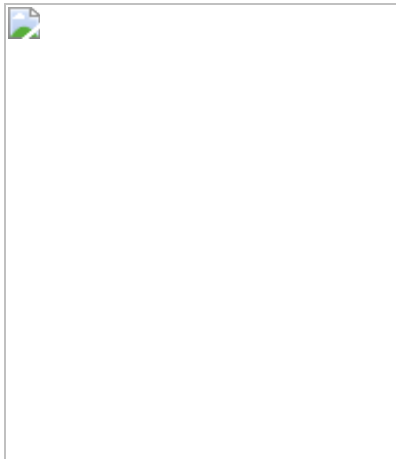
"Home," Technoblade says with a sigh, eyes caught on the window. Tommy tears his own astonished gaze away from the sights in order to look at him, swallowing.

"For you," he says. Technoblade just raises a brow.

"And now you, pup," he says. "Best to get used to the chill."

"I hate you," Tommy reminds him, for the thousandth time. "And this stupid place."

"All in good time," Technoblade says, peering once more out the windows as in the distance, horns start to blare and announce their arrival. "All in good time."



## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

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and that..... is the end of our first arc. tommy is finally in the empire properly, and he's had a time of it. wonder what the future could hold.... hey, also, make sure to check out the second work in the series! it's gonna be an art book, but right now it just has a map :) which i worked very hard on and may help with visualizing the world!!!!!! hee hee. if you enjoyed, PLEASE LEAVE KUDOS OR COMMENTS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!1 they make my brain go fuzzy good with serotonin. thanks!

if you're enjoying, be sure to subscribe to both the story and me on ao3 :) i post cool stuff and do cool things. also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

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SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!!!! this saturday (10/9) i will be hosting a stream on twitch!! chat will be helping me write fic through twitter polls, so if you wanna have some fun and hang out, go follow my twitch at [twitch.tv/thanotaphobia](https://www.twitch.tv/thanotaphobia) !!!!

## arc II. - one for sorrow

### Chapter Summary

tw5 / n/a

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Approaching the gate, horns sound.

The noise bellows through the air like an impressive procession of ducks or geese—everything comes back to birds with this damned kingdom, Tommy ruminates. Birds of a feather stick together, fitting for the Empire after all since everything he’s seen so far has been named after birds— and not the kind ones, either. He’s painfully aware of the symbolism of his arrival in Raven’s Flight. Once, when he’d been small, Dream had taught him a nursery rhyme chanted by the children in the Isles. Superstition about spotting magpies. *One for sorrow, two for mirth*, Dream had sung with a mocking lilt to his voice. *Three for a funeral*. The gates open wide and the switchbacks are long and crowded, flowers pouring like tsunamis over crowds of people as they clamor and push to see inside the carriage. Technoblade draws the curtains shut and Tommy sinks back in his seat, the jingling of his chains like bells in harmony with the horns.

Above them, the palace looms, drawing closer and closer. With every turn of the carriage’s wheel, Tommy feels his breath come shorter and shorter. He is the farthest he has ever been from home.

“We’ll get you set up when we arrive,” Technoblade says without looking at him, eyes cast to the outside. “And then I have things I’ll need to attend to.”

“Where will I be?” Tommy asks— surely the general needs to do work without Tommy around, after all. The idea of escape is practically unthinkable at this point; he’ll be in the center of a literal stronghold repurposed as a palace, with plenty of guards around to snatch him up. Once again he thinks of those fish in the barrel back in Osprey— no matter how slippery he tries to be, there doesn’t seem to be an out.

“You’ll find out,” the general says cryptically. That does not give Tommy any hope.

Four gates and fifteen minutes later, they pass through the entrance to the palace and into what seems to be the main courtyard. Long outdoor hallways corral them on either side, stairs and a grand doorway at the far end, blue banners hanging from every lamppost and column. Everything seems to be in shades of grey and white, intricate stonework detailing the stronghold with depictions of birds and flowers. In his peripheral, Tommy sees Technoblade

give him a nod, and so after a moment's hesitation he reaches out and unlatches the door, letting it fall open.

Muted noise now becomes clear, and Tommy tips his head out into the sound like a curious but skittish wild animal. The convoy they'd been with has scattered somewhat, soldiers and travelers milling about. In the corner there's a stall with flags of every color hanging from its wooden roof, a bored-looking official behind it as men line up to register back home. Women in long skirts and woolen pullovers mill about with baskets, some with flowers, others with food. In between the crowds run messengers, smaller in stature and clearly marked by the *kharvaa* they wear over their noses.

"C'mon," the general grunts. "Out you go."

Tommy thumps to the ground with both feet as he exits the carriage, ankles jolting slightly with pain at the uneven cobble stones beneath him— he shakes them out, narrowing his eyes with a hiss. The carriage creaks behind him, shuddering as it loses both their weight, and Technoblade's hand is warm on his shoulder. He turns his head, surveying the open space of the courtyard around them, the way the people they'd been traveling with have faces open with relief. The air is light— happy, even. They are home, and he is an intruder, and no matter what he does to try and alleviate the feeling it will most likely never be enough.

The warm weight on his shoulder lifts, but when he turns Technoblade is still right at his side, facing the other direction with a hand over his eyes. Still clearly paying enough attention to Tommy that if he bolts, there will be hell to pay, but giving him a step or two of space now as he searches for something around them.

"Uncle Techno!"

A voice rings out above the clamor and noise of the convoy, the sounds of horses and soldiers tacking up their armor for good. The people part like an ocean. There's an odd quirk to the general's mouth— If Tommy didn't know any better, he'd say the man is smiling.

The people continue to part and a flash of blue and silver appears in the crowd, darting between people and things and animals until it's all the way near them. Tommy tenses— the figure throws itself into Technoblade's chest. Anyone else might've met the wrong end of a blade if they'd tried that, but all Techno does here is bring one arm up stiffly and wrap it around the person's shoulders. They pull back, a wide grin on a charming face, an inch or so shorter than the general and notably wearing a prominent silver circlet. Brown hair, brown eyes, clothes much too fine to be anything but royal. Tommy recognizes him from pictures.

"Your Highness," Technoblade says, a gruff aura of fondness coating the words. They clasp hands, fingers gripping forearms, and the prince nods.

"It's good to see you," he says happily, bouncing on his toes as he glances around them all, eyes glancing off of Tommy. He's glad. He doesn't want to be seen at this moment, not this shame. Better to be invisible right now. He can figure out everything else... later. Once he's slept in a real bed, he thinks. Yes, that will be nice, despite everything else. "Is my father here? I heard the horns, but wasn't sure."

“He’s coming along later tonight,” Technoblade says easily. “He stayed behind in Osprey, in order to send off a few last minute treaty arrangements.”

“That’s good,” says the prince, focusing his gaze back on Technoblade. Tommy shuffles forward absently, paying quiet attention to the conversation as he presses one shoulder to the general’s cloak, eyes glazing over a bit. Exhaustion is one hell of a drug, and they’ve been traveling for nearly two weeks now. “It’s been a bit of a kerfuffle here lately, what with the news of the conquest ending. There’s parties to host now! I know you’ll enjoy those.”

“Hardly,” says Technoblade, rolling his eyes as the prince hooks their arms together and he’s tugged along. As if a last minute thought, Technoblade reaches out and plants his hand once more on Tommy’s shoulder. He follows, a present shadow in the general’s company and stumbling slightly as they slowly begin to make their way across the square. “No parties tonight. I need a bath, and— oh.”

Eyes on him, all of the sudden. Tommy can feel them. Two pairs.

“This is the former king Thomas of the Opus Isles,” Technoblade says. It stings. It hurts, but Tommy grits his teeth and raises his head, setting his shoulders straight like perhaps the prince will not notice the binds around his hands. He stands there, biting back the insults he so desperately wants to spit out.

“Your Highness,” he says, focusing on a spot on the other prince’s chin. Hah. Even great princes of the Empire get zits.

“It’s a pleasure,” says the prince. Then, aside to Techno: “He’s a bit young.”

“He’s technically a prisoner of war, but your father and his kind heart took pity.”

“Will he be staying in the palace?”

“You can talk to me, you know,” Tommy finally hisses out, the anger leaking out of his gut and into the open air around them. Again he’s being looked at, two sets of sharp eyes studying the way he stands and he knows it’s crucial to come across as strong here, but god he’s so tired. He forces himself upright anyways. Just like he was taught— shoulders back, eyes stern, mouth set in a grim line. “I exist as more than a decoration piece to add to your already decadent halls.” And then, just because he’s already sunk so low: “Eat shit and die.”

The prince stares. Technoblade raises a hand to his forehead and applies pressure. Tommy refrains from spitting on their feet. His self-control is frankly impressive.

“You’ve got quite a mouth,” the prince eventually says, a smile breaking out once more over his face. His smile is the kind to take over a whole expression— blasting through whatever confusion and remnants of worry had been laid there. It’s easygoing. It makes Tommy want to smile back, stupidly. “I’m Wilbur. It’s a pleasure to hear you’ll be staying with us— I’ll make sure one of the guest rooms is aired out for you as we go up. I’m sure you’re tired, it’s been a long few weeks.”

“You can say that again,” Tommy says, crossing his arms over his chest and turning his head to the side. Technoblade sighs.

“I’m sure you’re—”

“I didn’t mean it literally, you earthen clod.”

“Well then, my apologies.” The prince’s smile— Wilbur’s smile— is rightfully wicked, right arm still locked with Techno’s elbow. He turns his gaze from Tommy to the general, still smiling that wide, bright smile. It makes sense now, that this prince’s nickname is the Sun of the North. “Come on, uncle. Escort us up to the palace so we can get both of you a bath, and a nap for the child.”

Tommy is tired of arguing his big man status to everyone he’s met these past two weeks. And he’s tired. A nap sounds good. So he allows himself to fall into a glaze once more, albeit not without glaring at the prince first as they head up towards the grand palace.

Up the stairs, but not through the main doors. Those remain firmly closed as they duck to the left, finding one of the open gallery halls instead. They pass more than a few castle workers and soldiers, until they pass through a doorway and suddenly, they’re inside.

General Technoblade and Prince Wilbur are talking as they go. Mostly about the journey— Technoblade relays some of the less important events from their travels, and after that the prince begins to press about the siege and final days of the Isles’ independence. Tommy shuts his mouth through all the insensitive questions and remarks, even as Technoblade clearly tries to temper the prince’s curiosity. They walk, Tommy two steps to the left of Technoblade and Wilbur pressed up against the man’s side— they’re clearly comfortable with each other. The general is even smiling as they go, lips curling up a tad as the other man starts to regale them with tales from the palace here.

Tommy is trying to pay attention to both his words and the path they take through the stronghold as they walk, but it’s near impossible. The hallways twist and turn around them, each laid out with cold stone floors and carpets running down the center of them. Drapes hang from windows, thickly woven and heavily decorated. At one point, they walk down a hallway full of portraits. Tommy wants to stop and look— but he’s urged onwards, and so he goes. He’s so caught up in trying to take in his surroundings, he nearly doesn’t notice when the general stops in front of a large carved wooden door. He slams into the man’s back— handcuffs jingling gently. The prince snorts. Technoblade steadies him with a hand.

“Shut up,” Tommy murmurs, and the prince only reaches out to open the door with a smile. Inside is a small tea or sitting room— a lounge takes up half of it, facing a fireplace with a landscape painting over it. The other half of the room hosts a small table and bookshelves, a large rug encompassing most of the floor. There’s a fire going in the hearth, and the prince doesn’t hesitate to practically collapse on the couch. It’s blue. Everything is fucking blue.

“I’m fucking exhausted,” the prince complains. “Mum’s been having me keep up with paperwork. I mean, it’s not terrible, but it’s boring, all gods.”

“Riiight,” Technoblade drawls, the door shutting firmly behind the trio. He steps forward, giving Tommy a nudge from where he’d been frozen, standing a foot or two inside the doorway. “You’re exhausted. Turn around, pup.”

When Tommy turns, Technoblade has a key in his hands. He doesn’t have to say anything for Tommy to get it, and he rushes forward to meet him immediately, shoving out his hands for the lock to be undone and the metal to fall away.

“You sure that’s smart?” The prince calls out as Technoblade catches the linked metal, and Tommy absently rubs the places where it had been. “He might make a break for it.”

“I’m not concerned,” Technoblade says, setting the handcuffs down on a side table. “He’s tried plenty of times already.”

“And I’ve yet to learn my lesson,” Tommy sneers, ducking under his arm. Only for it to duck with him, catching him and hauling him backwards, away from the door.

“You wouldn’t make it three feet,” Technoblade says with a wry little smile. The man hasn’t even removed his armor– Tommy doesn’t think he’s even seen him without it yet. It’s cool against his front, and Tommy bares his teeth for a second before whirling around and studying the room once more. He ignores the prince entirely, stomping his way over towards the bookshelves and making sure to get as much mud on the carpet as he can.

“Journey was eventful, then?” The prince asks, and Tommy can hear the smile in his voice.

“Entirely,” Technoblade says. There’s the clink of armor as he moves, and Tommy tracks him as he sits on the couch beside the prince. “Move your feet.”

The books on the shelves are of all sizes and colors– Tommy tilts his head, reading a few spines as the prince and general converse.

“Deal with it,” the prince is saying. “How was it down south? Did it rain? Did you bring me anything?”

“I brought you victory,” the general says lightly. “Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“I would’ve thought you might’ve brought some candies or something,” Wilbur complains, and Tommy scrunches up his face, mouthing along. The prince is already making himself out to be annoying. “I’ve heard taffy’s popular down there.” Ruffling. Then, the prince speaks a bit louder: “Is that true? Thomas?”

Tommy considers replying. For a brief moment, he actually wonders if he should answer honestly. Mmm, no.

“Haven’t you heard?” He says, turning his head to find the prince’s sharp eyes watching him. “We eat our own babies. No need for taffy when we’ve got that.”

“Don’t be vulgar,” the prince chides, drawing his shoulders up in clear disgust. “No one eats babies.”

“Oh, but we do,” Tommy says, whirling about and grinning. “With all the food we’ve got down there, we had to find more exciting avenues of delicacies. I personally like my babies topped with apricot and cranberry syrup.”

“Thomas,” Technoblade warns.

“I don’t need to be polite,” Tommy says, snapping his gaze over to him. “So shut up.”

“Watch your tone,” Wilbur says, sounding even more affronted.

“He’s been like this,” Technoblade informs him, and they exchange a look that Tommy can’t read. “Don’t let it bother you too much. I still think Phil’s insane for it.”

“Blah blah blah blah,” Tommy says, waddling forward on stiff knees and bringing a hand up. He flaps his fingers, making his gloved hand look like it’s talking. “I’m Prince Wilbur and I think I’m better than you, and also cooler than you, but the truth is I’m a big dumb bitch.”

“Thomas!” The prince looks slightly scandalized. Technoblade has a hand over his eyes, and Tommy can’t help but burst out laughing. He practically doubles over as his amusement and nerves spill out, and after a second, he can’t stop. All the anxiety and fear from the past weeks practically explodes, and he’s wheezing as he laughs, arms clutched around his middle. He nearly staggers and falls— but the table’s in his way, and he leans on it for support after a second. By the time he’s got control of himself, a good minute or two has passed. Tommy lifts a hand to his face and wipes away the tears that have gathered in the corners of his eyes. Across from him, both Technoblade and Wilbur are staring at him, both looking slightly concerned. Tommy swallows, taking a breath.

“I didn’t think you were capable of looking like that,” he informs the general, who looks thoroughly more confused and concerned.

“Is he alright?” Wilbur says aside to Technoblade. “Is he broken?”

“He’s not delicate, if that’s what you’re asking,” Technoblade murmurs back. “I’m not sure.”

“Shut up,” Tommy wheezes. He can’t remember the last time he laughed— or, wait, yes he can. The day before the siege, when Dream had fallen over out of his chair from exhaustion. After making sure he’d been alright, Tommy and him had sat there for an hour or two just giggling. Whenever it died down, they’d look at each other and burst into gasping laughter for even longer.

It was nice, despite everything. He misses it.

It hits him then— an aching, terrible longing for his home. Homesickness, setting in firmly as he looks around the room and it’s unusual decorations, the books all in another language, his hands and shoulders bound in blue wool. The whiplash is startling— one moment he’s laughing, the next he’s biting his lip in order to stave off red-hot tears.

“I do think he’s broken,” Wilbur mutters a second later, after his silence and a visible slump in his shoulders.



“I am not broken–” Tommy snarls, anger rising just as quickly as his laughter had, and he lunges forward– maybe he’ll get a hand in that pretty brown hair, pull some of it out (and Technoblade is already rising to meet him, gauntleted hands reaching–) when the door opens.

All of them freeze in their tracks, turning towards the door.

“My,” someone says, and Wilbur immediately jumps up, a grin splitting over his face. Technoblade visibly relaxes, and Tommy is left confused and exposed in the center of the room. “What is going on?”

“Mother,” Wilbur says, reaching out and meeting the hand of the prettiest woman Tommy thinks he’s ever seen. She’s got long dark hair and even darker eyes the color of soil in summer, pale skin that brings out the red of her lips and cheeks. Embarrassingly, Tommy’s first thought is: *Prime herself has come to earth*. She looks every bit the part of a goddess, but then he takes in the fine blue dress she’s wearing, delicate black gloves, and white woolen fluff around her neck. Silver decorates her throat and head, a tiara tucked gently in the parts of her hair that are pulled back and up and curled.

“Wil,” she coos gently, bringing her son’s hand to her mouth. “Care to explain why I can hear voices from down the hall?”

“We’ve got guests,” he explains.

“Hey,” General Technoblade complains. “I live here.” He’s gotten up from the couch as well. He bows his head as the Empress makes her way over to him, the picture of elegance and grace. She peers up into his face, squinting her eyes slightly as they silently stare at one another. For some reason, Tommy thinks Technoblade looks *nervous*.

“Technoblade,” she greets him. Her eyes skim over his face, calculating. “You’ve got more grey hairs than last time we spoke.”

“Good to see you too, Kris,” he says with no small amount of exasperation.

Then her gaze turns to Tommy, and he is unexpectedly terrified.

“And who is this?” She asks, making her way over. He feels filthy and underdressed– he’s intimately aware of the dried mud on his temples, the way his gloves and cloak don’t fit right, the tears in his clothing. “Looking like a raccoon you pulled off the road?”

“This is the former King Thomas of the Opus Isles,” General Technoblade says by way of introduction. Tommy stares at the floor, and the rushing fabric of the empress’ dress. His own boots look pitiful.

“And what on earth is in your hair?” She asks, reaching out. He stiffens, shoulders tensing as she takes a strand of his curls and rubs it between forefinger and thumb.

“It’s–”

“From him, Technoblade. Really. He’s got a mouth, he doesn’t need you to speak for him.”

Tommy swallows.

“It’s mud, Your Highness,” he says quietly. She tsks lightly, and he feels himself shrinking a bit.

“So you get a *Your Highness*, and I get called a bitch?” The prince scoffs, coming around to the side and glaring down at him. Tommy fights the urge to glare right back. “What kind of bullshit.”

“Wilbur,” the Empress says scoldingly, letting go of Tommy’s hair after a second. “Your tone.”

“Sorry,” he mutters, not looking particularly apologetic. Behind them both, Technoblade watches on with an unreadable gaze.

“So you’ve got a mouth on you then?” The empress asks, and Tommy gnaws on his lip before nodding a bit. Better to be truthful. “I can’t imagine why.”

“Might have something to do with being kidnapped and dragged here like a trophy,” Tommy says before he can stop himself. He gapes for a moment, and then decides fuck it and continues. “No offense, but the Empire’s hospitality has so far been quite shit.”

The room is quiet for all of ten seconds before the empress laughs. It’s like bells— nothing like Dream’s or Tommy’s, or even the emperor’s. Tommy blinks, finally tipping his head up to meet her gaze. She’s smiling wide, lips parted in laughter and head tossed back slightly in delight.

“You make a convincing argument,” she says, looking back down at him and grinning when they lock gazes. “I mean, look at you. Filthy as a rat. Come now, let’s get you cleaned up and in some proper clothes.”

“Now hold on,” Technoblade interrupts as the empress turns back towards the door, still smiling. “Kristin, he’s in my charge. I’m not supposed to—”

“I overrule whatever Phil said,” she says with a fling of her hand. “He’s got his head all twisted around anyways, with all the work he’s doing. Let me handle our guest tonight, and tomorrow he’ll be safely and *cleanly* back in your hands.”

Something is rising in Tommy. It might be delight. It might be whatever’s in his stomach, coming up to surprise them all and spatter on the floor. He can’t tell just yet, as the empress beckons for him to follow. He steps forward immediately, keeping just enough distance as not to touch and get his muddy hands or anything on her person.

“I have to object out of principle,” Technoblade is saying. “At least take the cuffs—”

“Nope,” Kristin says, popping the ‘p’ in the word. “Absolutely not. He won’t cause any trouble, will he?” Her gaze turns back to him, eyes narrowed and slightly mischievous. Tommy blinks, and then slowly shakes his head.

“No, ma’am.”

“Then there you have it.” The empress turns back around to Technoblade, who’s glancing between them looking more and more stupefied. “He’ll come with me and that’s that.”

Tommy scampers along behind her as they exit the room, the door swinging open in front of them with ease. He glances back for a brief moment as they go— but neither the prince nor the general seem to be following. They’re just staring, both looking mildly concerned, amused, and baffled. Tommy takes his chance; just before the door swings shut behind them both, he reaches up and stretches an eye out, sticking out his tongue and blowing a raspberry. It’s childish, but worth it to see the affronted looks he gets in return.

“Thomas,” the empress calls out. The door bangs shut and he turns, already seeing her a bit down the hall. He has to jog to catch up, feeling only a bit ashamed. “We’ll go to the baths first, alright?”

“Yes,” he says. He’s already eager to scrub the dirt off his skin— it’s like a filmy layer all over, and he practically reeks of horse and body odor, he knows. Plus, his hair is a mess, tangled and muddy. He’d do anything for a hot bath right now, which is exactly why he’s following the empress with no trouble at all. Escape can come second to this. A moment later, he remembers his manners: “Thank you.”

“Of course,” she says kindly, glancing at him as they walk. “I won’t have guests treated unfairly in my home.”

Tommy blinks. “The general says I’m a prisoner. I thought as much.”

“Things may change when my husband arrives home,” she admits, tipping her head. “But for tonight, at least, you are my guest. When was the last time you had a good hot meal, hm? Or a bath?”

“Weeks,” he says. “It’s been awful. I hate traveling.”

“So do I,” she admits. “Such a bore, the long stretches of road. And you had quite the time coming up, and in such circumstances.”

“Yeah.” Tommy frowns. Circumstances sure have been unfortunate for him as of late. “It’s not been fun.”

“Mm.” The empress smiles down at him, a kinder face than one he’s seen in days. She again reminds him of Clara, or the Lady statues he sees in church. “I understand that you being here is a delicate and difficult transition. But you must know that it is necessary.”

“It’s...” Tommy stalls for words for a second, tasting iron as he chews the inside of his lip. “It’s not fun.”

“No,” she says. “But it is merciful compared to what could’ve been done.”

“I’m not here with you to be lectured,” Tommy says somewhat warily. “I’m here to get a bath.”

She laughs, bells again. “Of course,” she says, still smiling. “I like you already, Thomas. Clever.”

He blinks.

“It’s Tommy,” he says a second later. “Thomas is too formal. I always– I like Tommy better.” Maybe he’s reaching for something to remind him of home. Maybe he’s being optimistic– telling this charitable empress what he likes to be called rather than letting her assume. Maybe it’s just him latching on to the one source of kindness he’s being shown here to an unhealthy degree. But as she looks at him again with those dark eyes and pretty hair, a certain kind of nostalgia in her gaze, well... it’s hard not to.

“Kristin,” she says. “You may call me Kristin.”

“Hullo, Kristin,” he says, trying the name out on his tongue. It’s nice. “You should divorce your husband.”

“Oh, really?” Kristin raises her eyebrows, snorting a little.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “He’s a right dickhead.”

She laughs again. He likes the sound.



The room the empress leads him to is truly a bath room. There’s a gauzy curtain in the middle, separating the room into two sections, and when Tommy peers behind it he finds a deep tiled pool filled to the brim with water. Shelves boast different soaps and towels, and on the edge of the pool are heating runes, lit up as they work their magic and as the water steams. The place is positively steamy– to the point where Tommy is sweating the moment they step in the door.

“I’ll go find some of Wil’s old clothes,” Kristin says as he explores the room, drawing the curtain back for a moment to watch him. “And have someone bring them in for you. Come here, let me see how wide your shoulders– alright.” Tommy slips in front of her, and she puts two hands on his shoulders to judge his measurements. “Sound good?”

“Yes,” he says, practically bouncing on his toes, eager to get into the water and wash the horrible days of traveling off. “Very much so.”

“Okay,” she says, patting the top of his head gently. “Make sure to scrub. You’re going to need it.”

She leaves, and he's alone. Truly alone for the first time in...

Well. A long, long time. Tommy can't really remember the last time he was actually alone in a room. He takes his time, drawing the curtain back across the room and picking out soaps and shampoos. He tugs his boots off and carefully tosses each filthy item of clothing into a corner before actually bathing.

It's great. The water's brown by the time he's finished. It takes him a good hour and a half for him to be done, too— he scrubs his scalp so hard he probably draws blood. The door creaks open once or twice while he's busy, but when he emerges and wraps a fluffy towel around himself, all he finds is a set of clothes for him to take. They're a bit big on him, but that's alright. He tugs on the underthings and then the white undershirt, buttoning it up in the front. Pants next, shirt tucked in, and he has to roll up the legs a bit in order to stuff them into a pair of boots that fit damn near perfectly. On top of the white shirt is a blue woolen top, and over that is another blue jacket with silver buttons down the left side of his chest. The jacket only comes to his mid-forearm, leaving enough of the white shirt out to poof. Gloves on his hands, a short cloak around his shoulders, he turns—

And stops.

There's a mirror in the corner of the room. He catches his own eye, damp hair hanging in his eyes and curling around his ears. He's blond again with all the mud washed out— and the blue makes him look pale.

Tommy stares at his reflection. It's worse than in the streets of Osprey— then, he'd been in disguise. He hadn't been meant to recognize himself.

It's so much worse when he knows he should be able to.

He looks like a stranger in his skin. Someone else is piloting the king of the Isles; the silver around his neck and on his chest looks more like chains than anything else. Tommy lifts a hand and watches as the mirror warps it.

He glances back over at his golden clothing in the corner of the room. Dirty still, but...

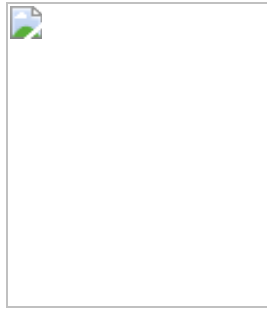
A few minutes later, Tommy is sat on the floor with a length of torn golden silk between his teeth. He turns to his own chest and weasels a fingernail under the silver buttons, popping them off one by one as he goes, letting the chains fall to the ground. He wraps the golden stretch of silk around his middle like a sash— it clashes with the blue, but as he tucks in any of the torn parts, hiding stains behind him, it almost looks good.

He rips the chains off the cloak next, tearing the corners until they pop out. He ties the golden laces from his undershirt on that, to match the makeshift sash.

Tommy looks in the mirror once more, assessing his makeshift tailory. No longer is he clad in only the colors of the Empire— this time, he's got plenty of gold to at least make a statement. No green, but it'll have to do.

“Alright,” he says to no one in particular as he tugs and pokes to get things in the right places. Prime, Empire fashion is suffocating. His throat feels all claustrophobic. “Better.”

He feels less like a stranger in his own body. His hands feel like they’re his own once more, and with that, he leaves the dirty bathwater and ripped clothes behind him.



He steps out into the hall, and is promptly met with a friendly face. Or, as friendly as a face can get. Tommy remembers this one from the embassy in Osprey– he freezes, blinking at the soldier who gives him a smile.

“Hello, slippery bluebird,” Jabber says. “Her Highness sent me to fetch you when you were done.”

“Right,” Tommy says. He doesn’t miss how their eyes catch on his alterations to the outfit, but thankfully, they say nothing. Instead they step aside and gesture.

“This way,” they say, and off they go.

The empress is not far. Jabber takes him just down the hall to another small room, opening the door for him and then faithfully standing outside it. Tommy blinks– the empress is sitting at a desk, glancing up when he steps inside.

“There you are!” She says, moving to stand immediately and planting her hands on the table. Her gloves are gone, exposing painted nails. She looks him over, cooing instantly, and Tommy shrinks in on himself a bit as she comes over and starts poking and prodding.

“Look at you,” she says, straightening his lapel, smoothing down the fabric on his shoulder. She stops at the ripped bits on the coat and cloak– her eyes roam over his additions, and she purses her lips. He waits, expecting a scolding– but all he gets is a small tight smile. “I should’ve figured,” she says. “We don’t have much in the Isles’ colors here. I’ll put in an order for the tailor. I like this.” She tugs on the end of the makeshift sash. “But it’s missing something...”

She takes a step back, and Tommy shifts on his feet, waiting. Her eyes roam, and then finally, she brightens. Off her own breast comes an elegant emerald broach– he’d hardly noticed it before, but now he can’t not. It’s pretty but small, darkened iron around the edges that meld it into the blue of her dress. She takes it and carefully attaches it to his sash, arranging it so it looks pinned instead of tucked.

Green and gold shine against one another. Tommy wants to wilt.

“There,” she says. Her hand comes up to tug at his hair a bit, the fuzzy bits that have fully dried by now. “Much better. You look nice and put together now for dinner.”

“Dinner?” Tommy perks up. There’s a window behind the desk and he looks over Kristin’s shoulder– outside, it’s dark. It had been sunset when they had arrived– he’s not surprised that it’s truly dark by now. He can feel the exhaustion hitting him too, but the promise of food is too good to refuse.

“Dinner,” Kristin nods, smiling.

They make their way down to the dining room together– Kristin still leading the way, but Tommy easily matches her in step this time. They head back down the way they’d come to the bath, and Tommy’s surprised he recognizes the way. Mostly thanks to a tapestry depicting Prime– he stops for a brief moment, ducking his head towards Her and then hurrying after Kristin once more.

The dining room is quite grand. The table is long and already covered in dishes– Tommy’s struck suddenly, thinking of Osprey and watery, salty soup (and bodies in the streets, but he... tries to push that memory away). Kristin is hardly bothered. What really stops him in his tracks, however, is that Technoblade and Wilbur are already sitting at the table and apparently, deep in conversation.

“–e’s said that it’s not quite right, though,” Wilbur is saying, and quite loudly too. Neither of them look up as Tommy and Kristin enter. “It’s a major third, not a perfect fourth.”

“Yeah, but it’s unsettlin’,” Technoblade responds quickly. Wilbur rolls his eyes, biting down on a piece of bread. “If I was listening to it, I’d be annoyed.”

“Everything annoys you,” Wilbur points out, mouth half-full. “Who’s the great composer here?”

“Neither of you,” Kristin says, swooping to sit in one of the seats at the head of the table. Tommy pauses on the other side, then sits across from Wilbur. “Wil, you’re a lovely musician. Don’t give me that look.”

“I’m a composer too,” Wilbur insists.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Kristin says with no small amount of cheer. “Look at your war spoils, Technoblade. I’ve given him proper treatment.”

“War spoils?” Tommy asks absently, tipping his head to look further down the table. He recognizes a few of the dishes, but most of it is very foreign. After a second of careful consideration, he takes a roll. When he glances up from it, Technoblade is watching him with a very careful look.

“He looks pampered,” the general says after a second.

“No thanks to you,” Tommy spits back. “You still smell, actually. Like horse shit.”

“I’ve been busy,” Technoblade says.

“Yeah, gossiping with me,” Wilbur points out. “I’ve just gotten used to it. The smell, that is.”

“Wilbur. Mouth full, what did I just say?”

“Sorry! Sorry, fine, yeah,” Wilbur says, looking not very sorry at all. He looks perpetually sad, actually— Tommy has to look to see it, but his face slopes and hair ducks low over his eyebrows in such a way that he seems to be always thinking. Technoblade scowls.

“Ha ha,” Tommy says with a grin. “You’re in more trouble than me.”

“You’re a prisoner,” Technoblade points out.

“Don’t be mean to Tommy,” Kristin says lightly, clinking her spoon against her bowl. Two heads whip to look at her— mouths gaping open.

“Tommy?” Wilbur asks. “Since when did you two become best friends?”

“Your mum is much nicer than you are,” Tommy says primly. Wilbur turns to look at him, and all he does is grin. “You must take after your dad. Bitch.”

“Will you quit it?” Wilbur snaps.

Technoblade pushes up from the table, hands bracing gently on either side of his plate. “I’m going to bed,” he declares. He turns a bit, nods his head to both Kristin and Wilbur. “Your Highnesses.” When Tommy clears his throat, he is staunchly ignored.

“Fine! Take the smell with you!” He shouts in response as Technoblade leaves, a flurry of cloak and fur and the stench of horse. The table is silent for a moment after that— Tommy takes the chance to really dig into one of the meats, taking a slice and cutting it apart carefully. It’s fragrant, really good; across the way, Wilbur pokes at his plate while at the head of the table, Kristin sighs.

“I expect a certain amount of decorum from you all,” she says after a moment. “Especially during more public events.”

“I would never be rude in public,” Tommy promises, swallowing fiercely.

“Sure,” Wilbur cuts in, rolling his eyes. “You certainly seem the type to be well-behaved.”

“I’m sorry, did the bitch-boy say something?” Tommy asks, tipping his head to look around. “I thought I heard buzzing. Like a mosquito.”

“This,” Kristin interjects. “Is what I don’t want. Boys, please.”

“I don’t understand why he’s not in a cell,” Wilbur scowls, leaning back in his chair. “He’s a prisoner. Dad’s going to be peeved.”

“Your father can take it up with me,” Kristin says. She sighs, leaning her head back against the wooden chair behind her, and Tommy chews slowly as he watches the two bicker. He’d quite liked his and Wilbur’s back-and-forth— it had been entertaining at least, to see the prince



flush with annoyance. Now, he just lowers his head, still scowling but keeping it directed at his plate instead. “Wilbur, when I dismiss you both, take Tommy to the Yellow Room.”

“Yellow Room?” Tommy blinks, then goes very, very still. His fingers still, shoulders tensing some. “What is that?”

“It’s a guest room,” Wilbur explains, still sounding vaguely annoyed. “They’re color-coded. Don’t freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” Tommy says stubbornly, forcing himself to relax. “It’s not my fault you name your guest rooms like torture chambers. Do you have torture chambers? That’s freaky. You’re all freaks.”

“Please let this night pass by quickly,” Wilbur bemoans, face tipped to the sky.

“Prime probably isn’t listening to you,” Tommy informs him gleefully. “She doesn’t listen to bitches. She told me Herself.”

“And now we’ve got a little zealot on our hands.” Wilbur’s eyes turn a tad sharper. “You buy into all that, huh?”

“I’m not a zealot,” Tommy says, taking another roll and buttering it liberally. “Whatever that means.”

“Wilbur.” Kristin’s voice is one of warning. “Drop it. No religion or politics at the table.”

“He is *literally* a politic.” Wilbur points at Tommy. “Right there. At the table.”

“Eating,” Tommy says through a mouth stuffed full of bread. “Enthusiastically.”

“May I be dismissed,” Wilbur says through gritted teeth. He’s gripping the edges of the tables, knuckles white. “Please.”

Kristin looks between them two, and Tommy hesitantly sets down his fork.

“It’s late,” she finally acquiesces. “Fine. Yes. Go. Tommy, I’ll send some attendants to bring you nightclothes.”

Wilbur stands, ducking his head towards the empress, and Tommy mirrors it. He lingers a moment, waiting for the prince to make his way to the door before he meets her gaze.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. Kristin just smiles, and then he turns to go and follow the insufferable Prince Wilbur to his bedchambers. They’re silent the whole way there, tension growing like a roaring river between them. Tommy can almost hear the crashing of waves between them like the Kernach, but this time there is no raft to carry him over. Stubbornly they’re both quiet, until finally Wilbur stops and gestures to a door with a heavy yellow gem set into the handle.

“The Yellow Room,” he says. And then— “Goodnight.”

He disappears down the hall. Tommy is left alone with the guards— one opens the door for him, and he steps inside. It's a cozy thing, with a grand bed in the center of the room and a hearth, already lit. Bedclothes lie out for him, a tea set on a small table by the door.

Tommy thinks of his bedroom in Caterwaul's palace. He's got big open windows there, a balcony, his own closet and bath. Here, he runs his fingers over empty bookshelves and they come back a bit dusty. There are no billowing curtains and cool breezes. Only a chill seeping in through the stone, and empty of anything living but himself.

He sits gingerly on the bed, nudging the nightclothes out of the way. His fingers find the emerald green brooch the empress had given him— he unpins it from his waist, turning it over and over in his fingers. A reminder of kindness where everything else has been hostile.

Tommy finds his way to bed eventually. He does not let go of the brooch even as he sleeps, restless.

## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

HEEHEE KRISTIN TIME MOM IS HERE!!!!!! WOOOOOOOOOOOO WE LOVE MOM!!!!!!!!!! oh and ig wilbur is here as well yeah that happened ope-

hope you guys liked it, sorry it's later today, i was both sick and busy :) but it is here now

if you're enjoying, be sure to subscribe to both the story and me on ao3 :) i post cool stuff and do cool things. also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

## **arc II. - blood of the covenant**

Chapter Summary

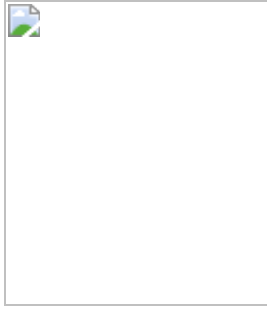
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Chapter Notes

politics time!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)





Loyalty is something that aches. It tugs at the heartstrings, takes a toll on a person's self-worth.

It's a feeling Tommy knows well. Putting one's own ideas aside in order to do what's best—he's been trained in the art of loyalty and submission for the people. It's a skill like any other; mastering a language, ghosting fingers over piano keys, being able to write a speech. Tommy can remember nights he'd spent up late with Dream at his side, the idea being drilled into his brain: the kingdom comes first. The people come first. You are an accessory, not a necessity.

Never a necessity.

Tommy is familiar with loyalty without reciprocation. A kingdom doesn't give back to its ruler, in the end.

It's so painfully obvious now what Dream meant. Here Tommy is, weeks away from his kingdom and people, and yet they live on without him. He wakes up in a cold palace in the north, knees to his chest and cheeks tacky with dried tears, and the world still turns. The citizens of the Opus Isles face the new day just as Tommy does: with a weary look and a grim determination to make the best out of a bad situation.

He dresses himself in a similar way to yesterday—someone has clearly been in the room before he woke up, the fire still going and new clothes hanging in the wardrobe, doors opened in clear invitation. He takes some time to explore the room more fully—peering out the window, finding a sheer drop outside and below, more stone walls and some empty garden space, covered with a thin layer of frost. The curtains are thick and heavy, and he has to tug in order to get them truly open and allow the sun to pour in. He spends some time with his head poked outside, cracking open the glass and feeling the cold air on his cheeks. By the time he shuts them again, his nose is red and stiff.

The morning is calm, in an eerie way. No one comes in or out of the room as he changes—at home, in Caterwaul, he'd have a whole array of people by his side in the mornings. Now, he's alone.

That is, until he's halfway through buttoning up a jacket (it is so cold here for no reason, and the amount of buttons and fastenings on the Empire's outerwear is fucking *ridiculous* ) and someone knocks at the door.

"Come in," he says, fumbling with another silver trapping on this stupid fucking jacket. He's expecting someone with breakfast maybe, or a servant here to poke the fire—

But what he gets is the prince, with a sour expression and an apple in his hand.

“Morning,” he says, slipping into the room and shutting the door behind. Tommy freezes up, then relaxes into a scowl of his own.

“What do you want?” He asks, not bothering to return the sentiment. It’s not going to be a good morning if this motherfucker is here.

“Well, excuse me,” Wilbur says, lifting his nose.

“You’re excused,” Tommy cuts in before he can continue. “Now please leave. Out out. Shoo.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Wilbur says, slinking across the room. Tommy turns to watch him, narrowing his eyes as the older prince falls back onto Tommy’s unmade bed. He moves with a confident sort of grace, sprawling out on the sheets and openly staring at Tommy as he continues to struggle with his buttons. “I’m under strict orders to get you breakfast and then take you to see Technoblade.”

“Gross,” Tommy complains mildly, glancing down at his fingers. They’re shaking, for some reason. He frowns a bit and takes a second to breathe and steady himself. “What for?”

“Treaty and surrender,” Wilbur says easily. He takes a bite of the apple clutched in his hands, sitting up as the crunch echoes around the room. “Paperwork.”

“Ugh,” Tommy continues to complain. “I can’t ever escape that shit.”

“Sucks for you,” Wilbur says with a cheeky grin. He takes another mouthful of apple, then holds it out towards Tommy. “Hungry?”

“You just ate that,” Tommy says, scrunching his nose up in disgust. “You’re gross. No. I don’t want your mouth germs, they’ll probably poison me. And then I’ll die.” Tommy pauses, and then tips his head, considering. “Actually, give me—”

Wilbur snatches the apple back as he reaches out, brows furrowing. He draws his feet up from the floor and leans back as Tommy leans forward, grasping for the fruit. Balance shot, Tommy pitches forward, nearly falling onto the prince as they grapple for a moment.

“Just give me the fruit,” Tommy insists, planting a hand in the sheets and stretching. Wilbur’s too tall, however— and Tommy has not yet hit a growth spurt that’s sorely needed. “Give it!”

“No!” Wilbur grins, ducking his head and dodging Tommy’s flailing elbow in order to slip off the edge of the bed. He dances away, a gangly mess of limbs, holding the apple above his head the whole way. Tommy rears around, scowling as he goes.

“You’re a bitch,” Tommy spits.

“Get some new insults,” Wilbur shoots back. “Tiny gremlin.”

“Fuck you!”

“Fuck you. Your buttons are done up wrong.” Tommy glances down, momentarily distracted from the dance with the apple, and swears. Wilbur is not wrong— he’s done up his jacket a fastening off, the lopsidedness throwing off his whole front. He swears again, moving to undo them all and retry.

“I hate you,” Tommy informs him, heaving out a breath. “It’s your fault. You distracted me while I was trying to get them buttoned. And now I’m hungry.”

“Well I’ve taken a bite out of this already,” Wilbur points out. “And you don’t want to catch my diseases. So I suppose we’re at an impasse, unless you want to rebutton your jacket properly so we can go.”

“Fuck the jacket,” Tommy sneers, finally just shoving the fabric off his shoulders and tossing it to the floor. “It’s a gross blue anyways. I hate it. I hate everything.” He reaches into his pocket, tugging out the emerald brooch and pinning it to his left lapel. Wilbur is staring at it, but when Tommy waves his hand he snaps his gaze back up to his eyes. “Breakfast. Then take me to the fucking brute.”

“Remember what my mother said?” Wilbur queries, tilting his head and raising a finger to his chin. “About decorum? *I’m* trying. You should too.”

“My circumstances are ex-ten-u-ating,” Tommy says, sounding out the word carefully. “I can be as rude as I like.”

“Prime, you are insufferable,” Wilbur sighs, but pushes open the door as Tommy approaches it looking ever similar to a charging war horse. “Fine. Breakfast. Come along, child.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” Tommy insists, crossing his arms as they exit the bedroom and into the hall. There’s a startling number of guards outside his door— four in total, one on each side and two on the other side of the hall. Although, it’s really not surprising when he thinks about it. Tommy glances over at Prince Wilbur— if he had this guy locked up in Caterwaul, he’d be taking the same precautions. The man just looks suspicious, and Tommy has an idea that he’s trying very hard not to be right now. “I’m literally the king.”

“You were *a* king,” Wilbur points out, taking another bite of his apple. “Not mine, either.”

“Still am,” Tommy says with a nod. “Of the Isles. Formally.”

“Are not.”

“Are too.”

“Are not.”

“Are too!!!”

“Nope. You’ve been legally, officially, and socially overthrown. Your people definitely wouldn’t want you back,” Wilbur says, turning back to look at Tommy. He’s stopped in the center of the hallway at those words, clenching his hands into fists by his sides.

“You’re wrong,” Tommy says after a second, then practically spits the word out onto the floor in great globbering wads of saliva. “You’re *wrong*. I– you– I– I– shut up!” Upset curls in his stomach, one big ball of fury and hatred. Hatred for this damned empire and what it’s already taken from him. Wilbur is watching him with narrowed eyes and slowly takes another bite of his apple.

“Whatever crisis you’re having,” he says, “or are about to have, I don’t know– whatever it is, it can wait.”

“It cannot,” Tommy huffs, air coming from his nose hot and heavy like a bull. “You’re such a fucking prick.”

“Part of the job description,” Wilbur informs him, then turns on his heel to keep walking. “Come along.”

“This isn’t your job,” Tommy reasons. “It’s just– your life. This is how you live.”

“I definitely don’t want to have to live with you.”

“Well with any luck, you won’t. I don’t want to live with you either. Your country sucks. It’s too fucking cold.”

“It’s hardly below sixty? Wimp.”

“Don’t call me that!” Tommy jogs to catch up at this point, catching up to Wilbur and his stupid long legs. “Where are we even going?”

“You are terrible at retaining information,” Wilbur informs him as they continue down the halls. “Here’s our schedule,” he continues. “We’ll tour the stronghold and a bit of the citadel in the morning, and then around noon we’ll see Technoblade for treaty and surrender chats. Since you’re still technically the reigning monarch of the Isles, they need you there. After negotiations is lunch, and I’ll be there but you’ll have been handed off to Techno for the afternoon, so. You’ll stay with him. I’m not sure what he has planned, but I’m certain it’s banal and nap-inducing.” Wilbur’s eyes glint as he glances down at Tommy, mischievous in his delight at the fact. “I will be roaming to my heart’s content while you’re with him. My father will be here at some point in the afternoon, so there’s that to plan for as well.”

“That’s not fair,” Tommy’s quick to pick up on the sheer audacity of that statement. “I don’t want to be stuck with that idiot. He’s got a stick up his butt– bigger than the one up yours, even.” Wilbur’s uproarious laughter doesn’t please Tommy. No, if anything, it pisses him off more. “And! I don’t want to get to know your stupid castle! It’s cold and boring and terrible! Get some fucking windows in here!”

“I’ll be sure to tell Dad to put some in,” the prince says teasingly, once he’s straightened up and caught his breath. Tommy scowls. “Since His Highness is demanding it. You have a window in your room, don’t you?”

“Yeah, with a fifty foot sheer drop below,” he grumps. Wilbur raises a brow.

“You won’t be escaping anywhere, little king,” he replies, turning to face the stretch of hallway before them with his hands clasped behind his back. It’s very princely. It’s very... classy. Tommy emulates it, clasping his own hands behind his back and deciding at this moment he is going to outclass Wilbur in everything he can.

“I wasn’t trying to escape,” he says simply. “It’s common knowledge that a king should know every possible in and out of the room he’s in.” That’s weird. Wasn’t Wilbur trained in survival and self-defense? He’s a prince, sure, not a king. But he’s the firstborn. Crown Prince, technically. So surely his father would’ve taught him the necessary skills. Or General Technoblade? He seems like a survivalist type, even if he’s a bit on the scary side otherwise.

Wilbur is side-eyeing him. Tommy wrenches himself out of that train of thought, and the memories of Dream instructing him to point out every nook and cranny in the throne room he could in under five seconds. He shoves aside the thought of this hallway— long, cold, windowless.

“Whatever,” he says evenly, pretending like the way his voice bounces off the echo-chamber stone doesn’t cause him enormous amounts of anxiety. “Continue, prince bitch.”

“...right,” says the prince. They head down the hall, footsteps filling the air as they go. “Like I was saying. That’s the schedule— I should probably get you acquainted with some of the layout. This hallway leads out of the east wing, which is where our living quarters are. The west wing is mostly meeting rooms and boring administrative stuff. The throne room is there. Ballroom. The works.”

“Gross,” Tommy interjects.

“Very,” Wilbur shoots back. “You’ll be seeing a lot of it in the next few weeks. I imagine you’ll be exempt from parties, however. Your prisoner of war status can be blamed for that. Lucky you.”

“Gee,” Tommy drawls, sticking his hands in his pockets as they turn a corner at the end of the hall. “I feel so lucky.”

“I’m sure you do, tiny king.”

“Stop calling me that, bitch.”

“Never. Would you rather I call you a child?”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m afraid I can’t.” Wilbur keeps walking, tapestries and paintings lining the walls as they continue, carpet starting up and dampening the sound of their combined footsteps. Tommy’s eyes linger on the painted faces of the prince’s forefathers, and quietly, he names them each in his head.

Until a small, quiet voice in the back of his mind pipes up. He stops. It takes Wilbur a moment to notice, with how he’s blabbering, but eventually he does, turning around and



squinting in Tommy's direction. The fucker's got glasses on. Why should he need to squint? Asshole.

"Is something wrong?" The prince asks, taking a few steps back towards Tommy. Tommy, who's standing in the center of the hall and feeling very, very small next to all these portraits. Portraits of family, of people who are behind Wilbur. Literally and metaphorically.

He doesn't let it show. Or at least, he tries not to. Poker face, he reminds himself. Like how George taught you.

"I'm being babysat," is what he says after a moment. "You're on babysitting duty."

Wilbur pauses. Rocks back on his heels.

"I suppose I am," he acquiesces. "You *are* a child."

"This is fucking ridiculous," Tommy says, throwing his hands in the air. They are going in circles conversationally, he can feel it in the air. "Fuck this shit. Fuck you."

"As much as I want to leave you behind— and oh boy, do I want to— I can't," Wilbur says. "Now stop lollygagging."

"What does that me—" Halfway through his sentence, Tommy is cut off. And not by Prince Wilbur's stuck-up voice, or any voice at all. Instead, bells begin to ring. A second later, horns blare, and Tommy is left cringing and shoving his hands over his ears at how loud and suffocating the noise is. Wilbur is unbothered— other than the startled look on his face, which is quickly turning to glee.

"What the hell is this?" Tommy shouts, having to raise his voice to be heard over the sound of the instruments. Then, it hits him: he's heard this before, albeit fainter when he and Technoblade had first arrived.

"My father!" Wilbur says with a nasty type of glee. He reaches out, ignoring how Tommy flinches when he gets too close, and snags the younger boy's arm in his grasp. His fingers are warm, even through Tommy's sleeve. They take off running down the hall and Tommy lets himself be dragged, wheezing as they stagger past paintings and doors and down a flight of stairs, then up another, and then around a long hallway with even larger windows— and then Wilbur lets go of his hand in order to throw open a pair of double doors. The blast of cool air is nice after the quick dash they'd made through the stronghold, and Tommy steps out into bright mid-morning sunshine with a squint. Wilbur is already leaning over the edge of the balcony, so far out that Tommy has the brief thought to push him.

But he shoves that aside when his eyes adjust and the view takes his breath away.

His room he'd slept in last night had been facing a mountainside. Any view from his window had been looking towards ice and snow. But the balcony they stand on now faces the city proper— Raven's Flight— and Tommy is speechless.

Glistening granite and marble buildings reflect the sun as they line the edge of the cliffside, much like wine overspilling a glass. People mill about below them, looking everything like ants working in the earth. Tommy slowly makes his way to Wilbur's side, and this time, has to resist the urge to pull the other boy backwards. Because they're at a dizzying height, and just looking down makes his breath catch and head go sideways.

"Holy shit," he says quietly. The whole city is awash in sunlight, and it's... pretty. Caterwaul had been gorgeous on a good day. This city is handsome in its polished shine. Beautiful in its own right. Tommy can appreciate architecture when he sees it.

"Look," Wilbur says, a hand once again grabbing Tommy's arm. It doesn't pull this time—instead, Wilbur points, one long arm and hand extending over the edge and gesturing towards a spot halfway up the hillside. "Horses."

If he squints, Tommy can make them out. But that's not the only thing he makes out. Amongst the blues and whites of the Empire flags littering the streets and rooftops, he can see flashes of other colors, too.

He glances up. A wide plain stretches out before them. Tommy suspects on a clear day, you could see miles across to the opposite side of Crow's Chasm. Today, there's a fuzz in their air, and it paints the horizon a milky blue.

"What's going on?" Tommy asks, turning his eyes back down to the city. Wilbur has stopped pointing, but he hasn't let go of his arm yet.

"He wasn't supposed to be back this early," Wilbur says, and he's got a thoughtful look on his face. "Technoblade said tonight."

"Maybe he misjudged," Tommy offers. It's happened to him before, after all.

"Maybe," Wilbur says. He goes quiet, however, and they watch. After a bit, the horns and bells peter out. The wind whips at Tommy's nose and hands, and Wilbur eventually ends up tugging gloves on. Tommy shoves his fingers in his armpits and tucks his chin to his chest, nose in the collar of his jacket until finally, the gates to the lower courtyard open up.

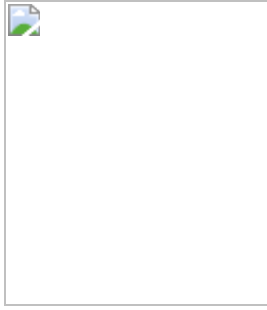
"Dad," Wilbur says fondly as Emperor Philza parades through on a horse. Tommy can't see the man's expression just yet, but after traveling with him for a week and a half he reckons he can spot the tension in his shoulders from here. Wilbur's own are quick to follow. His eyebrows furrow. "Something's wrong."

"Look," Tommy says, and now he's the one half-leaning over the edge of the balcony despite the way it makes his stomach twist and turn with anxiety. "A carriage."

"Or three," Wilbur says, as a parade of them begin to crawl in on unsteady wheels.

"Or four," Tommy frowns, and then, a flag. A deep royal purple, a lighter pink, and black as dark as the sky at night. Another flag alongside it— tan and grey and dark browns.

"Libra and the Vaults," Wilbur says grimly. "They've come together."



They hardly make it back inside before there's the sound of footsteps, marching armor.

"Wilbur," Technoblade says, and his eyes are harried but not panicked as he sizes the two of them up. "Pup," he says a second later. Tommy scowls.

"Techno," Wilbur nods. "What's going on?"

"Philza's home," Technoblade says, and a few guards are by his side, even more rushing past. It seems the palace has sprung to life— everywhere he turns, Tommy finds another servant or guard in his gaze. "And the delegations have arrived. We'll meet them in the Great Hall. Hurry."

And they hurry. The Great Hall is presumably the room behind the main gate— Tommy's guess is proven right when they slip in a side entrance, the ceiling arching high above them in glorious arches. Between the stone in the vaulted ceiling are paintings; light, colorful ones, that catch the eyes upwards. Windows too, high above and letting in sunlight. At one end of the room are two large wooden doors, and at the other, a small dais and thrones atop it. Kristin is sitting in one of them— the others are empty. She rises as Technoblade urges them to approach, footsteps echoing along the long expanse of the room.

"Lady," Technoblade says, almost fondly. "Your husband is home."

"I saw," she says. Wilbur takes his place by a throne and Tommy is left stranded, floating at the base of the dais. He's not sure where to go, but then General Technoblade turns and eyes him up and down.

"How do you feel?" He asks. The question takes Tommy off-guard.

"What?"

"How do you feel?" He asks again, sounding a tiny bit exasperated. "Tired? Like you'll start insulting foreign delegates and making a scene? Do I have to send you away?"

"No!" Tommy shakes his head vehemently, snakelike anger curling in his gut. "I know how to behave myself, don't be such a fucking dickhead—"

"Then get up here," Technoblade says, gesturing to his side. The man is already on the dais, Kristin watching with a patient smile. Wilbur is staring at the doors ahead of them, but when Tommy stammers for a moment, his gaze snaps back. Tommy shuts his mouth, swallows, and then slowly and carefully goes to stand by Technoblade's side, where he's gesturing. He's

thrown back to their time traveling all at once, even if he has no bindings on his hands here, even if the room is different and he is dressed in good clothing.

He is captured. He is being displayed like a trophy, and he knows it.

It hurts.

He has no time to ruminate on the awful feeling. There will be plenty of time left later for it to fester— now, a guard nods to another and slowly, with great care, the large doors at the other end of the room open. The wind whooshes through the hall, and Tommy resists the urge to tuck himself behind the general and maybe steal some of the thick-looking cloak he's wearing.

Emperor Philza Minecraft Watson enters in a flurry of unkempt blond hair and blue robes. He looks like a man who is trying very hard to capture the aesthetics of a scholar. The only thing he is missing is perhaps a dash of ink on his cheek, or a quill in his hand. Tommy has vivid memories from those late nights on the trip north of Philza looking exactly that— a quill in hand, a paper or book in his lap. He looks nothing and everything like a king as he storms his way up to the dais, cheeks and nose a bright pink.

"They arrived in Osprey last night," he says as a way of greeting. Kristin nods to him and he leans over, pressing a kiss to her cheek, and then patting the prince's shoulder. General Technoblade nods. "I wasn't expecting them so soon. I thought we'd have a day or two to prepare."

"We'll figure it out," Kristin soothes, pulling a crown from seemingly nowhere to fit onto her husband's head. The jewels glitter. "I've been drafting agreements."

Philza turns his eyes to Tommy next, and he feels himself shrink away from it.

"And how are you?" He asks, voice a tad gentler than the clinical tone it had been a moment before. "Adjusting?"

Something clicks into place just then. Philza never intends for Tommy to go home, does he? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer; Tommy never thought he'd have to consider himself the enemy to anyone, but here he is. A war prize, some sort of pet that the emperor can show off.

He'll likely never see Caterwaul again.

"Let's get this over with," he grits out, turning to face the great doors. Outside, there's a crowd of flags and people and guards and eyes are already on them inside. Tommy wants to disappear and die already.

"Alright then," Philza says, and then nods. "Sit, let's go."

And so begins the first steps of a very intricate dance. Emperor Philza sits in his throne and awaits an audience of dozens, all from countries entrenched in their own internal politics. The first steps to learning a waltz are always a square— a lesson in balance and cooperation. Face

your partner and place your hand upon their waist or shoulder, and compromise as to who moves backwards first.

Libra and the Vaults are two proud nations, Tommy knows that. He knows their internal structures, their languages, their cultures. He knows Libra is more secretive than most and desperate to stay neutral, but he also knows that the Vaults are open to negotiation. Libra's people are proud and flighty and nervous and easy to pry apart if you have the right drinks. Citizens of the Vaults are stubborn and talk too much and too loudly, and love to get into a debate. Guide them each the right way and they'd make powerful allies. There's a reason Tommy allocated some of the taxed food from the Isles to the Vaults— they needed the armor, and Vault technicians were happy to provide if it meant relief for their families. Even deep in the Underground the effects of the Cataclysm were felt. Tommy thinks of the layered structure of the subterranean city, and how the lower levels flooded and remain so to this day.

He scans over the sea of faces as they enter the hall, every group coming up to bow before Philza and exchange a word or two of pleasantries. Tommy scans their faces every time, searching for someone, anyone he knows. Once or twice he recognizes a few, and he knows they see him too. In fact, everyone is staring. All eyes in the room gravitate back to Tommy in the end— a disgraced king, a little angel fallen from his heaven. He knows they're whispering.

Quietly, he clenches his fists and tries to keep his breath steady. Even so, he can hear it. Wordless buzzing all around the room, none of which he can make out. But it's about him and the self-conscious side of him is going to go *mad*—

"Thomas," Technoblade says. Tommy refocuses his eyes, and the general reaches out. Tommy hesitates a moment, then unclenches his hand and settles it in the older's palm. "Breathe. You'll pass out if you keep locking your knees like that."

"Shut up," Tommy hisses back, but he doesn't pull his hand away from Technoblade's until the strange tight feeling in his chest has passed. Then he snatches it back, the warmth of his fingers lingering on his palm.

"Just a suggestion," Technoblade murmurs, just loud enough for them to hear. "You falling over now would make you an even bigger fool in anyone's eyes. It'd also make it look like we're torturing you, which would be bad for the press."

"Sure," Tommy whispers, raising his chin a bit higher. He can't hear the buzzing over Technoblade's voice. He hates to admit it, but he'd helped. "Because that's all you care about. Good press."

"Mmm."

They fall into silence as the last delegation retreats from the dais, and after a moment, Philza stands.

"Friends," he says, a clap of his hands hushing the room in a second. Tommy's envious of that power. "It's an honor to have so many of us here today, together. I'm reminded of a time not-so-long ago when similar celebrations were held. Raven's Flight welcomes you all, and

proper accommodations have been prepared. This meeting marks the end to a long fight and a continent-wide struggle. It is here we will administer the *coup de grâce* to this war that has lasted a painstaking five years.” Tommy grits his teeth. “To see all of us in one room at last is something I thought I would not live to realize.”

*Oh come on*, Tommy sighs, but keeps his face as straight as possible. *I wish you’d died, old man.*

“I’d like to invite you all to rest tonight,” Philza continues, a warm smile on his face. Now, with his hair down and cheeks still red, crown glimmering, he looks entirely the part of benevolent king. Tommy knows better than to trust that. “And in two days time, I invite you all to celebrate here once more. Thank you.”

With that, he steps back and sits once more. The hall is quiet before he raises a hand, then explodes into movement as people start to bustle around and gather their things. Servants come and go, and General Technoblade steps forward. Tommy follows— they’re only a few steps behind the thrones to the emperor’s left, and so when Technoblade leans in to mutter to Philza, he can hear the whole exchange.

“A party?” He asks, watching the crowd (and Tommy) with careful eyes. “Are you aiming to make my work more difficult?”

“It’ll be fine,” Philza reassures him, a hand coming up to pat Technoblade’s shoulder.

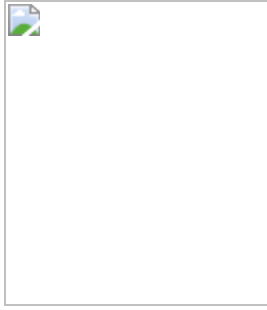
“Besides, the party relies on whether or not the next two days go well. I’ve spoken with the necessary people— we need to be in the Sunrise Room in the next twenty minutes or so. All of us.” Technoblade nods, and then pulls away, and Tommy is left slightly confused as Philza stands. The room goes quiet once again, only for Philza to raise a hand and let them fall back into chatter as he makes his way down the dais and out of the room— the empress and prince hot on his heels. Tommy is left with Technoblade, who starts down the dais as well and ushers him along.

“Where are we going?” Tommy asks, keeping his shoulders straight and voice low. People are still watching, and they will be. Intense scrutiny is going to be expected over the next few days. He’s hoping he can drum up some pity with it. “Technoblade?”

“I’m sure you recognized some of the delegates,” the general says, nodding to a guard who opens the door and shuts it behind them as they enter a much quieter, less crowded hallway. “It’s time for politics.”

“Oh,” Tommy says. Then— “Oh. This is going to be really *fucking* boring.”

“Yup,” Technoblade agrees. It seems they’ve found common ground. “Come on, pup. We’ve got treaties to witness and argue about.”



Politics, as Tommy said earlier, are really fucking boring.

They end up in the Sunrise Room— a long room with a long window and an even longer table sat in the center of it. Technoblade explains as they sit there that the room faces the east, meaning in the morning the sunrise is visible. Tommy helpfully informs him that he doesn't care, and after that most is quiet except for the shuffling of papers and the stressed words of Philza whenever he asks something of them. Wilbur paces, chatting intermittently with Technoblade in low voices. Kristin reads over her husband's shoulder, and Tommy swings his feet.

A few minutes into this hushed silence, the door opens.

"Your Highness," someone says, and thank Prime, Tommy can put a name to the face. He's from the Vaults and Tommy has spoken with him before— he went by Samuel, if this is who Tommy thinks it is. He immediately sits up a bit straighter, stilling his feet and instead tapping one hand along his leg where it can't be seen or heard.

"Sam," Philza says warmly. "Good to see you."

"Of course," the man nods, ducking into the room. He's taller than Tommy remembers, and behind him are a few more people. "These are members of the diplomatic committee," he says, eyes still on the emperor. Sam has a kind face— brown hair, a sharp nose, dark eyes. He's got a mask as well, but that's pushed down by his neck at the moment, tubes and other wiring coming out of parts of it. Tommy stares for only a second before looking away at the others filing into the room. Three other men, each just as tall as the first.

Tommy feels deeply out of his league.

"My wife and son," Philza introduces, and then gestures to Tommy. He pushes himself out of his seat and bows quickly and politely— he can remember Dream's hand on the back of his neck back when he was little, showing him. Ingraining the idea of etiquette into his head. "King Thomas of the Opus Isles."

"It's an honor," Tommy says, pressing his right fist to his left shoulder and bowing his head. Sam does the same.

"It is nice to see you again, King Thomas," Sam says warmly. "The last time I saw you, you were much smaller."

“People grow,” Tommy says, and it gets a laugh out of more than one of the diplomats.  
“You’re a lot taller, after all.”

“That they do,” Sam agrees. Tommy does not miss the way the man’s gaze snaps to Philza and then back to Tommy. Clearly, he’s noticing things. Good. Tommy moves to sit once more as both the emperor and Sam do, Technoblade dipping in to whisper in Philza’s ear after a moment.

“Do you mind if we wait?” Philza asks after a second. His smile is easy but underneath the casual, it’s tense. “The council members haven’t yet arrived.”

“Of course,” Sam says. “I saw Hannah on our way here, actually. She mentioned they’d be a moment.”

“Ah, of course. You traveled together beyond the Nordyrsgn?” Philza asks. It’s all just filler talk— nothing important, not yet. So Tommy lets himself zone out, staring at the table and keeping his eyes down. The chatter eventually dies down, and then the door opens once again.

“Hannah,” Sam says, and Tommy looks back up. Wilbur’s at Phil’s side now, Kristin at his other, and she’s also smiling wide as she reaches out. Tommy’s familiar with the Libran councilmembers— even their newest, a boy only a little older than him. Hannah is a shorter woman, long brown hair braided intricately up the back of her skull, dressed in the flowing robes of her kingdom. She’s absolutely stunning as she reaches out and grasps Kristin’s forearm gently, then nods to Philza.

“Your Majesties,” she says kindly, then to Tommy as well. “Your Highness.”

He nods back, and she moves further into the room, still smiling. “I am senior councilwoman Hannah Rose,” she says. “With me are councilmembers Sniff, Connor, and our newest— Ranboo.”

Ranboo is tall. Stupidly tall. Sniff is shorter than Hannah even, and Connor is an unimposing young man with light brown hair. Ranboo, however, is *tall*, and his shoulders hunch and Tommy meets his gaze harshly only for the guy to flinch backwards. Tommy resists the urge to sneer as they take seats around the long table.

“I think this is all,” Philza says after a second, splaying one palm against the wood. “Are we in agreement?”

“Hold on,” Hannah says, lifting a hand and tilting her head slightly. “King Thomas is outmatched, I believe.”

“I can speak for myself,” Tommy jumps in. His hackles raise slightly at the insinuation that he can’t. “But your concern is appreciated.”

“I didn’t intend any insult,” she continues, looking his way with no small amount of pity. “But you are at a disadvantage regardless. It seems unfair you are allowed to negotiate terms of surrender and treaties on your own, with no advisors at your side.”



“Advisors from the palace in Caterwaul are traveling north as we speak,” Philza cuts in. “His Highness will not be alone soon.”

“Hannah’s right,” Sam says after a moment of silence. He leans back in his chair, hands folding over his chest and eyes narrowed, just a tad. “I’d feel uncomfortable proceeding with him all by himself.”

“I am right here,” Tommy says, and no matter how he tries to mask it, the exasperation shines through. “I can hear all of you, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t— if I was treated like the Prime-blessed ruler that I am.”

“I am speaking up on your behalf,” Sam points out, and well, Tommy can’t exactly disagree with him. “I think we should wait for any serious meetings to take place after the advisors from the Isles have arrived.” He looks over to Tommy, an intimidating wall of a man, and all he can really do is nod.

“Of course,” Philza says after a second of silence. “I’d be more than happy to. Motion to wait?”

“Seconded,” Tommy’s quick to say, and Sam slowly nods. Across from him, Hannah glances around, then nods.

“Of course,” she says graciously. Tommy internally sighs a bit of relief. Maybe this meeting won’t go on any longer than it has to. He’s itching to get out of the room and away from the prying eyes— maybe back to the Yellow Room, where he can just relax and definitely not hide. He is not hiding. No sir.

“Then there we have it.” Sniff speaks up this time, smiling gently. Her hands are clasped in her lap, gossamer strands of silk floating around her head when she moves it to look at the emperor. “While we have you here, however, may we ask you about some trade details?” The question is obviously directed towards Philza, but it’s Kristin who answers.

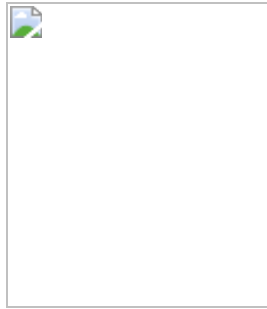
“While I encourage these discussions, I’m feeling a bit tired,” she says gently, nodding her head. “If my husband will be so kind as to dismiss me.”

“Of course,” Philza says, reaching up for a moment to squeeze her hand. Tommy watches as Wilbur leans in, whispers something, and then eyes are on him. Not like they weren’t before— he’d been watching the councilman Connor, who had been staring at Tommy intently ever since he’d arrived in the room. He’d been trying to avoid it, but it had been exceedingly difficult. “Thomas,” Philza says. “Will you escort my wife?”

“What?” Tommy asks, then carefully catches himself. Never be rude— that had been a rule with Dream as well. Earn favor, and it might get you somewhere in the long run. And Kristin is kind and nice; Tommy is still wearing the broach she gave him proudly on his breast. “Oh— yes, of course.”

Something is up. He knows it, as he watches eyes shift around the room and gazes narrow in suspicion. The war is over— but the fight has just begun. *Politics*, Tommy thinks wrathfully as he takes Kristin’s arm in his and Wilbur falls into place behind them. *Fucking stupid.*

They leave the room, and any talk of negotiation behind. But Tommy knows he's made his mark. There had been enough pity in that room to stifle it entirely— and that's all he needed.



“So,” Sam says, leaning back further in his seat once Tommy has left the room. “Philza.”

“Ah.” The man in question blinks. “It seems I’m in trouble,” the emperor says as he looks around the room, the faces in it all turned towards him at the head of the table. None of them are happy. Technoblade easily falls into line behind him, hovering, protective.

“What have you done?” Hannah asks, raising a hand. “Look at that boy— what have you done?”

“What needed to be done,” Philza says simply. In his mind, that’s all the situation is— simple. “Would you rather I had killed him? Because if it had been up to his people, they would’ve had his head on a pike.”

“Oh Prime,” someone mutters, and Sam sinks his head into his hand with a long exhale.

“I got him out of the Isles,” Philza says, leaning forward. No one speaks up after a second, so he continues— “If I hadn’t, and had left him there, he would’ve been taken by his own citizens. You know what the public view of this war has been. Atrocious, especially on his end.”

“He’s a child,” Sam insists, raising his head. “You’ve kidnapped him.”

“With good reason,” Philza argues. “He’s safe here.”

“Safe?” Sniff shakes her head. “Hardly.”

“Raven’s Flight is the most secure city on the Continent,” Technoblade pipes up.

“No one will argue that,” Connor pipes up, and all eyes turn to him. “What? They won’t. He’s right. The city is secure.”

“Thank you—”

“But. Wait, there’s always a but. And mine is this— what good is it protecting him from outside measures when the danger is already inside?” Silence falls over the table. Philza grimaces, and Hannah’s hand falls to the dark wood, tapping out a soft tune.

“That makes no sense,” Sam finally says after a second. “...What, you mean spies?”

“No,” Connor says cryptically. He doesn’t offer any more insight. Sniff blows a raspberry.

Hannah heaves a sigh. “Okay, look,” she says. “Neither of us agree with what you’ve done, Philza. And it’s clear by his— well, his *everything* today that you are trying to get him to assimilate to whatever plan you have in place.”

“There is no plan,” Philza insists. “Only safety.”

“Regardless,” Sam interrupts, waving a hand. “Regardless. I think we can all agree that peace is our end goal here. No matter what.”

There’s a chorus of agreement from the room. Even Technoblade nods his head.

“We are tired of blood,” Philza says softly. “And so are the Isles. I assure you, peace is the only option.”

Glances are shared.

“You did start this war,” Sam says gently. Philza nods.

“I did,” he agrees. “Out of necessity. My people were dying. The Cataclysm ruined what little land we had that could sustain agriculture. Thousands of livestock were lost. The fishing patterns changed. My people were *dying*, and the Isles had enough food to help. And yet they did nothing. They didn’t even bother to show up to the Diamond Conference— all of you were there. You know the importance of that event. The Opus Isles were stubborn and uncooperative in a fragile time, and people were starving. Yours were too.”

“I won’t argue that,” Sam says. “But war?”

“I’ve made my choices,” Philza explains. “I can’t go back on them now, so trying to debate them seems like a waste of time. I regret some things. I don’t regret others. At least now the Empire has some kind of support.”

“So,” someone says, voice only a bit shaky when speaking up in the silence after Philza. “What... exactly do you plan on doing with the Isles?” Heads turn and Ranboo shrinks back, fingers tapping together and hands wringing. “I— I mean, you have them now. But they have— I mean, advisors, and... stuff.” Silence, still. “Sorry. That was— that was weird, wasn’t it? Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Philza shakes his head. “It’s a valid question. My plans for the Isles are to keep them as-is, just under the Empire government. I’ve done nothing wrong to their people.”

“Well,” Technoblade says gently, softly. Like it’s an inside joke. “Well, on the other hand.”

“Shut up,” Philza rolls his eyes, reaching up to swat at Technoblade’s arm. “Ignore him. Look. Whatever you’re all thinking, you’re wrong.”

“I’m thinking...” Hannah says slowly, “...that you saw an impressionable young boy on a throne too big for him.”

“And either got greedy or got ahead of yourself,” Sam finishes. Philza’s spine straightens.

“I hope I’m interpreting your implications wrong,” he says after a moment, and then moves to stand. “Since you all seem so eager to jump to this boy’s defence, where were you a year ago? Two? Three? Five, when I first declared war? You chomp at the bit now in order to get a hold on— what was it you said, Hannah? An impressionable young boy? You were nowhere when he truly needed you in the face of my armies, and now here you are. He has lost. If I am nothing but a power-hungry fool, what does that make all of you?”

“Concerned,” Sam says. “We’re concerned—”

“Thomas is safe and well cared for with me,” Philza says sharply. “I dare any of you to argue it.”

Silence again. It falls over the table like a layer of new snow, soft and white and deadly cold. Philza does not let it sit for too long.

“It’s good to know where your priorities lie,” he says, lip curling into an approximation of a sneer. “Circling like vultures over a kingdom already deceased. I urge you to rethink. My hospitality only lasts so long.” He turns on his heel and shifts to the side, across the room to the door leading out to the hall. With one last glance back, Philza nods. His face smoothes out some, eyes losing their sharp gleam. “That was not a threat, and I didn’t intend it to be. We are in a time of celebration now. This is supposed to be a joyful event. An end to a bloody war. Please, see this out with me. I’ll be in my office if anyone has anything else to discuss.”

And with that, he is gone, General Technoblade on his heels.

“Prime,” Sam says after a second. “I can see why they say people here are carved from the ice themselves, not born.”

“Was that a threat?” Ranboo asks, voice still a bit shaky. “I mean, I know he said it wasn’t, but—”

“But it sure sounded like one,” Hannah finishes for him. She sighs, leaning forward and letting her braids spill out across the wood. “Oh, curse these stubborn Northern bastards.”

“Hannah,” Sniff says a second later. “We *are* Northern bastards. Technically.”

“Hush you and your technicalities,” Hannah moans, turning her face totally to the table now. Sam snorts out a laugh. “And you! You did not help!”

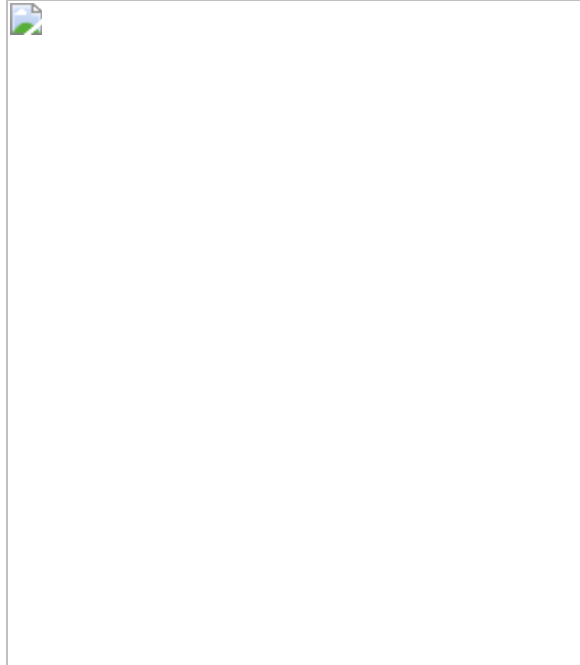
“Was I wrong?” Sam asks. “I still think the emperor got greedy. We’ll just have to see what he asks for when the advisors from the Isles arrive.”

“If they arrive,” Connor mumbles. “Something might... happen on the way.”

“Don’t be so negative,” Hannah scolds, lifting her head slightly. “I’m in dire need of a bath and a drink.”

“They say the Empire makes awesome vodka,” Connor suggests. “Potatoes and all.”

“That’s settled then,” Hannah says, lifting her head and meeting Sam’s gaze. They come to a quiet, mutual agreement: they will not poke the bear. Not tonight. “Off we go.”



## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

politics! politics! and like, a single breakaway from tommy's pov to get some insight on what's happening behind the scenes. veryyyy interesting, if i do say so myself. a whole ton of new characters, two new kingdoms, and a whole world to explore..... there's a map btw, in the next work in the series! if ur interested in the layout/geography!

let me know what you think so far!!!! im very curious as to what people think about the war and certain people's reactions >:)

if you're enjoying, be sure to leave a kudos as well!!!! and check to see if ur subscribed, press that big red- or- the button- the one that says SUBSCRIBE!

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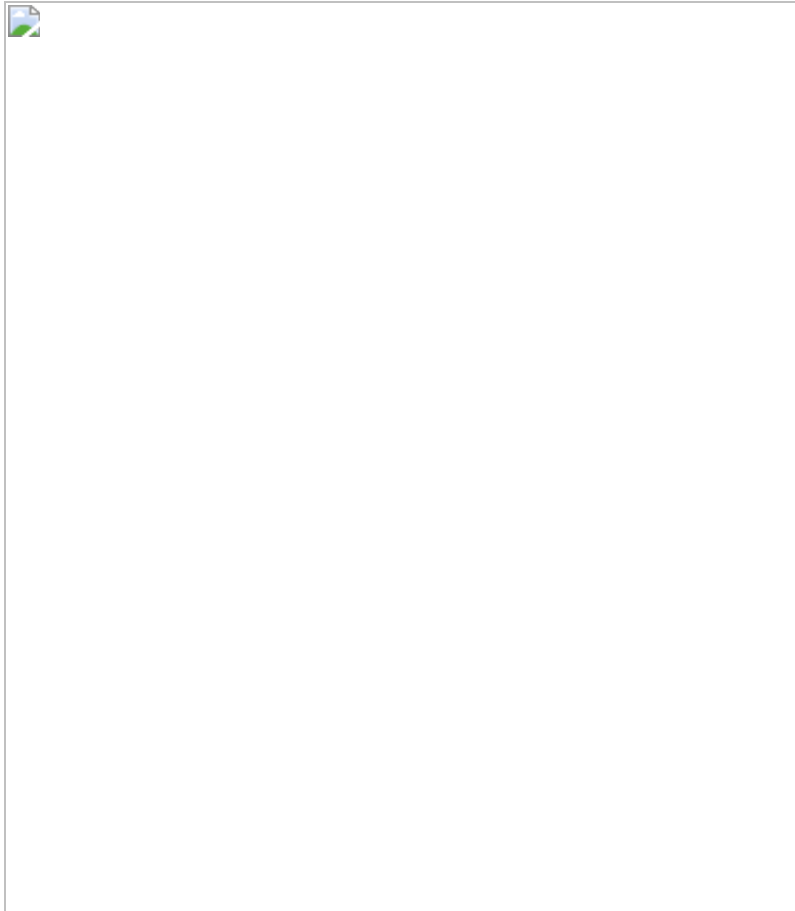
# arc II. - a party without cake is just a meeting

## Chapter Summary

twos: mild descriptions of almost panic attacks

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



“So,” Kristin says, as maids stream into Tommy’s room and start to make a complete and utter mess of the place. “Remember when we spoke the first day you arrived?”

It’s been a good few days since then, most of them blurring into one another. It’s hard to keep track of time when you wake to the ringing of bells and fall asleep long after the midnight ones have chimed. His days have been mostly occupied with shadowing Philza and Technoblade around, meeting with diplomats and advisors of all sorts. The committee advisors from the Isles had finally arrived a day ago, and Tommy has been knee-deep in paperwork and negotiation for hours now. He’s exhausted.

And now his privacy is being invaded upon by a woman with a warm smile unfitting of their chilly surroundings.

“Your Majesty,” he says, and then winces. He’s fallen into the honorifics like they’re old coats, well-worn against his shoulders.

“It’s Kristin, darling,” she coos, a swirl of skirts and fur as she approaches and presses a swatch of cloth to his chest. “You’re pale. Have you been eating?”

“Somewhat,” Tommy admits. Delegation meetings often had snacks, but his stomach’s been too nervous to actually indulge. “Enough.”

“Oh, I’ll be the judge of that,” she says, narrowing her eyes for a moment and then switching the fabric swatch out for another. “Blue or gold?”

Blue or gold. Good question. Tommy’s had his fair share of both colors over the past few days. Golden advisors, remarks about his hair. Blue Empire robes and the ever-constant presence of ice and snow out his window. The two scraps of fabric that Kristin is holding to his chest now, occasionally swapping over.

“For what?” He asks tiredly.

“Something to wear tomorrow,” she says after a second, and Tommy obediently holds his arm out when one of the tailor’s maids gestures for him to. They start to take measurements, and Kristin is watching him with careful eyes. “Tomorrow night?”

“Tomorrow night,” Tommy agrees, watching as the maid encircles the top of his bicep with a measuring tape. Then– “Tomorrow night?? Wait, what’s tomorrow night??”

Kristin laughs. Tommy just scowls. He’s been busy, alright?

“The court feast,” she says kindly. “To mark the end of the war.”

The end of the war, sure but not the true end of the negotiations. Those can last years upon years if they drag it out enough– he’ll give it his best shot, but even the advisors Philza had ferried north to help Tommy all quietly admitted defeat. Their armies had been decimated and morale was at an all-time low; anything they could’ve done was try and hold the land they still had. And that did not include Caterwaul. Apparently, they’d completely taken over the



city and the man that Tommy faintly remembers as Sneeg is running it as a lord to Emperor Philza.

“Right,” Tommy says. “Right. Yeah. ‘Course. I knew.”

“I know you did,” Kristin nods. “Now. Blue or gold?”

“Is that even a question?” Tommy snaps. “Gold.” He doesn’t care about the color of his clothing— but he knows everyone around him will. Blue is a sign he’s officially caved in and given up. Gold for the Isles is the only true answer here. “Only gold.”

“Alright,” Kristin says. “You hear the boy.”

“You’re not my mum,” Tommy sneers. He’s tired, moody— everything has been weighing heavily on his shoulders. Kristin just gives him a sad little smile at that comment, turning her back to him and fussing absently with the sheets on his bed.

“No,” she admits. “But you need someone on your side, dear.”

“I’ve got plenty of people on my side,” Tommy says, thinking of the advisors and their tired faces. How Dream had not been among them. He’d been so desperate to see him— when the horns had sounded and Philza had welcomed the men to the palace, Tommy had been nearly jumping out of his shoes in order to throw himself forward and search the crowd. Dream had been his main advisor, his right-hand man, his everything. His brother. But they had come forward one-by-one and at the end of the day, Dream hadn’t been there. No flash of blond hair two shades off of Tommy’s, and no wheezing laughter. No warm hug, arms so tight they could crush. Just a bunch of men that Tommy trusts, yes, but none of them special in the way Dream had been. When he’d questioned them all on his absence, he’d gotten worried shakes of their heads and apologies.

He wasn’t dead. That much, Tommy was sure of. He couldn’t be.

“You have good people on your side,” Kristin says, turning and smoothing a hand under herself as she sits on the bed. Tommy twists his mouth to the side and chews on his cheek absently as he stares down at the floor, shifting slightly for the maid. “But that doesn’t account for sheer numbers.”

“It’s fine,” Tommy insists quietly. Then, louder: “It’s fine. Things are fine.” He’s trying to convince himself. It’s not working. It must be clear on his face, because Kristin is frowning the next time he looks up. They stare at each other for a moment, and the maid taking his measurements finally finishes and dips her head. Around them, the room is cozy and warm. Tommy has filled some of the empty shelves with tiny items from around the palace— admittedly, things he’s pilfered. Just little trinkets, ones he can slip into his pockets and tuck away until he returns back at the end of the day. A silver candle holder there, a tiny statue of a bird, and one tiny Prime statuette that he’d taken and promptly prayed to in apology.

The fireplace is lit, flames flickering and crackling in the corner. The sound fills the room in the wake of their silence, Tommy watching them curl and lick upwards into the chimney.

“Sleep in tomorrow,” Kristin says quietly, and her skirts rustle as she gets up. Tommy stays quiet and still as she walks over, flinching slightly when her hand lands on his shoulder. “The party is sure to go late into the night. You’ll need the rest.”

Tommy knows better than to argue with the Empress. “Okay,” he says, still staring at the fire. Dream used to say he was good at zoning out— Tommy thinks that talent comes in handy now. It’s easy to float like this, ignoring the world around him and sinking into the warm depths of his brain. Nothing to fear here but himself.

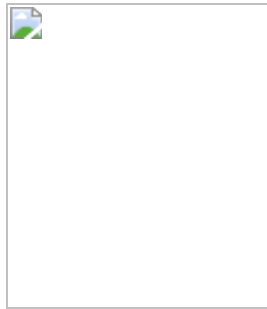
“I’m serious,” Kristin says, voice lilted with concern. “Sleep in. I’ll send breakfast here for you.”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight, Tommy.”

“Goodnight, Kristin.”

She leans in, her lips a bit cracked and dry against his temple. But they’re warm, and when he lifts his hand to the spot they come back tinted with the color of her lipstick. He rubs at the spot as she leaves.



The next morning is slow. It drags on like a slug, sticky webbed trails behind the entity that is morning. Tommy wakes up with a nasty stale taste in his mouth and the sun in his eyes, squinting out at the brightness and then hiding his face under his pillow. No one has come to wake him, not even to stoke the fire. The coals of last night’s heart glow faintly, and when Tommy eventually drags himself out of bed and holds a hand over them, they’re still warm.

He sits in front of the fire for a while, wrapped up in the huge comforter from the bed, dwarfed by the sheer mass and weight of the blanket. It surrounds him. It’s heavy, comforting in the best way. The coals stay unlit even when he pokes them once or twice, red rippling through the charcoal like waves on the ocean. It makes him ache for home— back in Caterwaul, he could just look out his bedroom window and see the river in the distance. It wasn’t the ocean, but it was water that led there. Now, when he pulls himself up and drags the blankets along behind him like a great cathedral veil, the window is stony and cold. Only mountains in the distance, whitecapped peaks licking the sky. He feels small.

The door creaks open.

“Tommy?” The voice echoes in the room and he whips his head around, sinking into the feathery fluff around him.

“You don’t get to call me that,” Tommy informs Emperor Philza as he slips into the room. “Never.”

“Duly noted,” Philza nods. He’s already dressed, hair done and lips quirked into a tiny smile. A crown sits neatly atop his head, hair braided down his neck and the occasional strand slipping loose. “Thomas, then.”

“What do you want?” Tommy turns fully and for a moment, he feels powerful. Maybe it’s the blanket around his shoulders giving him a head rush, or the fact that Philza looks just as tired as Tommy feels. Eyebags and wrinkles, crinkling the corner of his mouth and eyes, dark smudges. Two monarchs, exhausted by their rules. Tommy wonders if the emperor gets nightmares too.

“Just to check in,” Philza says smoothly. He moves further into the room. “My wife told me to let you sleep in, so I did. Should I call for breakfast?”

Tommy’s stomach growls. “No,” he says. “I’ll go find some in a little bit.”

“Sure,” Philza nods. “Up to you.”

They both go quiet for a moment, the silence syrupy and thick between them. The past few days have seen a lot said, and there is no lost resentment in Tommy’s heart for the Empire. He hates them: this is a fact that is true and simple. But he does respect them— or at least, he respects Philza. Tommy stays by the window as the older man makes his way over to the fireplace, poking at the coals not in a way dissimilar to Tommy’s own efforts. The only difference is that Philza is successful in reviving the flames. He stays crouched by hearth, and Tommy just watches.

“What do you want?” He finally asks, hiding the fear behind layers of bravado. He’s got a blanket cape— it’s got to count for something. Philza doesn’t turn to look at him head-on again, but he does glance sideways.

“Nothing,” he tells him. “Just to check in on you.”

Our hair is the same color, Tommy thinks to himself. Like straw in August.

“People always want something,” is what he ends up saying. “Always.”

“I don’t,” Philza says plainly. Tommy doesn’t believe him for a second.

“You do. You want my kingdom.”

“Not here.” Philza shakes his head a little bit. “In discussions, yes. But not here.”

“It doesn’t compartmentalize like that,” Tommy insists. “Everyone wants something. Most people will do anything to get it.”

“And who told you that?” Philza asks, brows furrowing together. “Because you sound like a parrot right now.”

“I’m not *parroting* anyone,” Tommy hisses, backing up until the small of his back hits the windowsill, the glass frosty against the back of his skull. “I’ve learned. From experience.” Dream had helped, too. Pointing out to Tommy when people wanted to use him, when they just wanted something from him in return for nothing of true value. He’s not about to get tricked here.

“...You have had far too much of that experience in your life,” Philza tells him. “Far, far too much.”

“I think my life is plenty fine.” Tommy tips his head, cheek pressed against the glass now. It’s grounding. “Better than a lot of people my age.” Dream had told him that too. “So what do you want? Ask, or leave me alone.”

“I don’t want anything from you, Tommy—”

“I *said* you can’t call me that.”

“Thomas.” Tommy turns his head back around and flinches. Philza is closer than he was a second ago when he last looked— now, the emperor is standing in front of him. Not looming. Just standing, watching him with careful blue eyes. Then he sighs. His shoulders slump, and Tommy wonders if this is a defeat or a victory. “Kristin told me you— Kristin said you were tired.”

“And?” Tommy scowls. “Everyone is. Tell her to stop snitching.”

The emperor snorts, and then sighs. “Look. Thomas. You’re tired. We all are. You’ve been running on adrenaline since you’ve arrived, and it’s not *healthy*. Just. Look, since you’re insisting. I... want to request you step back.” Philza is still watching him, still with that careful look in his eyes. It’s the same expression Tommy’s seen on stablehands whenever a horse got spooked— hesitant, but not afraid. “Officially. I want a full surrender. I want you to give up your title and claim to the throne.”

Of course. Tommy pretends he doesn’t want to crumple. “What happened to compartmentalizing it?” He asks dryly. Philza’s face twists, then falls as he sighs. “Over my dead body. Leave me *alone*.”

“Thomas.” Philza’s voice remains steady, even though he still looks like he’s facing down a wild animal. “Surrender and I will grant you a full pardon. You don’t have to carry this weight around on your shoulders. You could be happy here.”

“I don’t want a pardon. I don’t *want* to be happy here. I want to go home.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then no. The answer is *no*. Get it through your thick skull.”

Philza sighs, face breaking from his calm facade for a moment as he runs a hand through his hair once, twice. “What on earth would it take for you to give up your control over that kingdom?”

Tommy sneers. He bares his teeth– if His Majesty the Emperor insists on treating him like a wild animal, then he’ll act like one. Fuck everything else. “I wouldn’t,” he says, tugging the blankets more firmly around his shoulders. The relative surprise on Philza’s face makes his stomach twist in satisfaction. Outside, clouds are starting to form, covering the sun. “Not for anything.”

“You have two options,” the emperor tells him although his voice isn’t unkind, just firm. “Surrender and accept peace, or I will be forced to take other actions. I want to give you a choice, Thomas. Please. Think about it, before tonight. If you can make the right choice– because there *is* a right decision, here– then tonight will be an honest celebration.”

“Fuck you,” Tommy says without hesitating. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.”

Philza’s lips thin, and he nods. “Point taken.”

“Get out of my room,” Tommy orders him, lifting one arm still clad in silken pajamas to point towards the door. The clouds continue to roll over the city, promising first snow. Then, for good measure: “Bitch.”

“Alright,” Philza nods, turning after a second and heading back towards the door. Tommy feels himself relax the more steps away the other man is, and he lets his arm fall back down into his puffy cocoon. “I’ll see you tonight,” the emperor promises. Tommy hates the fact that he has to attend.

“Goodbye,” he sings. Philza gives him one last pained smile before the door shuts.

He relaxes fully then, fingers trembling as they grip the fabric of his blanket. He leans against the windowsill for a while, staring out as the clouds continue to gather in the sky.



The ballroom is very large, and very grand.

Soaring arches disappear into a gilded ceiling, a smooth, polished hardwood floor beneath their feet. Huge windows warp the walls and outside, the sky is grey and cold. There will be no vibrant sunset tonight. Tommy’s in formalwear befitting of a king of the Isles, golden silks and cotton wrapped around his torso in layers of grandeur. He thinks maybe it will help hide how he’s shaking on the inside.

He hasn't forgotten Philza's chat from earlier this morning. The emperor had left him with a haunting sense of dread. The feeling had lingered throughout the day and Tommy had remained holed up in his room for the better part of it, staring out the window and contemplating. A whole kingdom rests on his shoulders. The pressure is unbearable.

His feet click neatly against the wooden floors of the ballroom. To one side of the space are a few long tables, blue and white tablecloths draping to the floor, covered in an array of small finger foods and drinks. Servants mill about, their voices overlapping and echoing slightly.

"Tommy," Someone calls out, voice echoing. It's feminine, so he turns, and finds Kristin standing at the end of the room. He knows he's early. He wanted to get a feel for the layout of the place before he was thrown before the wolves, helpless.

"I'm angry with you," he says as she approaches. Wilbur is there too, following behind his mother's flowing skirts. "For the record."

Kristin's expression sours slightly at that, tilting her head and glancing him up and down.

"Do tell," she says. "But before that, you look absolutely lovely."

Tommy grits his teeth. He's not going to let her warm voice and silken flattery break down the walls he knows he needs to start reinforcing. "I'm angry," he reiterates.

"Prime help us all, then," Wilbur mutters, and from behind the glasses Tommy catches a glimpse of him rolling his eyes. "Beware the tantrum."

"He can't be any worse than you were," Kristin says cheerfully, before Tommy can bark out words filled with vitriol. "Especially at this age. Now, Tommy, what have I done to earn your ire?"

"You snitched," Tommy says simply, forcing down the retort for Prince Wilbur. That one can wait— he can catch the older Prince alone at some point and really ream him out. That'll show him. "To Philza. You told him things."

"Did I?" Kristin murmurs, smoothing her hands down the long skirts of her *ff'ekta*. A long overdress, embroidered up the sides and connected in the front by silver hooks and eyes. The dress underneath it is a brilliant white to contrast the dark blue. She looks like an Empress. Tommy will not be cowed.

"You did," he insists. "About my— state of mind, or something. He came to talk to me this morning and he knew things— he said things. You snitched. I would've thought that you would keep our conversations to yourself."

"Do you often speak of secrets with my mother?" Wilbur inquires. "Why am I never invited?"

"Take a guess," Tommy says to him, raising his nose a bit. "Prick."

"Thieving goblin."

“Pruny asshole—”

“Harbor rat.”

“Enough.” Kristin’s voice is firm and bellows out across the wide room. Tommy startles, drawing himself to attention and then scowling deeply. Right. He’d been here to talk to her, not Wilbur. For some reason, he always gets sidetracked whenever the prince shows his ugly face around. It’s unpleasant at best, downright vicious at worst. Hurling insults is fun, but only when Tommy considers them lighthearted. These are not. These sting. At least, he hopes they sting. “Tommy, I apologize for anything I shared that you wanted to be kept between us.”

Tommy blinks. An apology is the last thing he expected to come out of the Empress’s mouth—he almost doesn’t feel worthy of it. Nor does he feel worthy of the soft look on her face. Concern is not an emotion befitting of a king, he’d always been told. Maybe it’s okay for an empress. He’ll never expect to see the look on Philza’s face, though.

“Apology accepted,” he finds himself saying. “But I’m still mad.”

“I hope your spirits are lifted by the end of the night,” Kristin says with another small smile. She raises a hand, flagging down one of the servants milling about the room, and takes one of the gleaming drinks from their hands. “Wilbur, stay with Tommy for a bit, will you? I need to find your father and make sure he’s not making a fool of himself before the party’s even started.”

“I don’t need anyone to stay with me,” Tommy complains.

At the same time, Wilbur groans. “Mum, he’s not about to run off anywhere— see?”

Kristin’s eyes are firm as she sips on her fluted glass for a moment, then lowers her hand. “Stay,” she says. “And try to get along. I have a feeling Tommy will be spending a good amount of time with us, so it’d be nice if you two could at least be friends.”

Tough luck, Tommy thinks to himself, sneering at Wilbur as the Empress turns her back and floats across the room. Wilbur clearly returns the sentiment; he’s looking down his nose at Tommy with a grimace of his own. Tommy scrounges up what little knowledge he has about the prince already and lists it off in his mind.

Crown Prince Wilbur Soot Watson of the Antarctic Empire, eighteen years of age, four Tommy’s senior. Known for his charming looks and charisma, the prince is said to speak every damn language on the Continent, and play most of the instruments ever invented as well. They call him the Sun of the North for how he shines in a crowd, and others say he’s got siren-blood. Tommy knows better than that— sirens are myths, of course, and both the Empress and Emperor’s bloodline are clear of any public scandal regarding affairs. Unlike Tommy’s.

The prince has so far rejected every thing Tommy’s learned about him. Charismatic? Whoever said that must’ve been drunk.

“You’re ugly,” the prince says eloquently. Tommy just laughs to hide the sting.

“Says you,” he points out. “Get out in the sun much?”

“Plenty.” Wilbur shoots back. “More than you’ll be seeing in the future, anyways.”

“Ooo, scary.” Tommy rolls his eyes. “I know what you’re implying, and I’ll have you know I’m not frightened.”

“Oh?” The prince turns, raising an eyebrow. “What was I implying?”

“My status,” Tommy says simply. “As a prisoner. But I won’t be a prisoner forever.”

“You have no way of knowing that,” Wilbur says, just as simply. It’s true— there’s no way for Tommy to see into the future. But if there’s one thing Tommy knows about himself, it’s that he’s stubborn. And he can be even more stubborn if he tries. He grits his teeth, sets his shoulders, and nods.

“Maybe not,” he says. “But I will never bow down to you lot.”

Wilbur’s watching him. Tommy can see it out of the corner of his eye, and then head-on when he turns to look up at him. He looks as though he’s trying to read a particularly difficult book, staring at Tommy. Light glints off of his glasses from the lanterns around them, hiding parts of his eyes as Tommy stares right back.

“What?” He asks. “Stop staring at me. Pervert.”

“Loud and clear,” the prince murmurs, looking away after a moment. Tommy squints. Across the room, band members begin to file in through a side door, instruments gleaming. “I play, you know,” Wilbur says. “Do you?”

“A little,” Tommy nods. He’ll indulge some of Wilbur’s questions, especially on trivial pursuits like music. “Piano. Flute. Violin, poorly.”

“Techno plays violin.” Wilbur’s smiling as Tommy whips his head in surprise to look at him again. “When times are better. Sometimes we play together.”

“Why would you tell me that?” Tommy asks. “He’s a bitch. I don’t care.”

“I’ve got to redirect your sharp words onto someone else at some point,” Wilbur says, tipping his head from side to side. “Figured he’s as good a target as any.”

“You’re insane,” Tommy informs him. Wilbur just laughs.

A moment later, there’s the sound of music starting up— the musicians on the side stage, a violin and ensemble tuning. Tommy doesn’t miss how Wilbur’s eyes flash with something akin to jealousy, but then the other boy is turning and looking towards the doors.

As if on cue, people start to arrive. Actual guests. Tommy is assaulted with the glittery of finery and proper postures and accents from around the Continent. Without meaning to, he



finds himself a step closer to Wilbur's shoulder, breath coming a tiny bit shorter.

Wilbur hums, and Tommy tips his head up to glance at the prince. He's staring at the crowd, looking very much like a portrait. If Tommy wasn't on the verge of panic, he might find himself holding his fingers up to capture Wilbur in a square and say as much. As it is now, he can only stand where he is and flex his fingers by his sides. So many people, all of them looking for and at him. "You know," Wilbur says quietly. "We should be up greeting people with my mother. You'd just have to stand and look pretty, if you'd rather."

Standing and looking pretty is something Tommy is quite used to. He hates it, but it's easier than talking. Force a smile and a quiet but polite greeting and move on.

"Do I have a choice?" Tommy spits. Wilbur glances down, brows furrowing.

"Of course," Wilbur says. "I'm offering you an out of the crowd, you know."

"I know," Tommy says, curling his fingers into the soft fabric of his sash. Across his breast are several glistening pins—the emerald brooch is among them. "Just didn't expect it, 'pose."

"Well then, come on," Wilbur says. He plants a hand on Tommy's shoulder, firm and grounding. It reminds Tommy of Technoblade for a brief second, but then they're striding across the ballroom and heading towards the grand doors. Wilbur is smiling pleasantly as they pass people, and Tommy matches his energy with nods and a grin.

The panic settles slightly. His chest fills with air. Beside his side, Wilbur is surprisingly warm.

Thick with bodies and clothing, the room heats up quickly. The grand open windows and inherent chill of the north do little to cool the party down. Women in dresses flit across the dance floor, men hand-in-hand with them. Those in between join occasionally, makeup curving their smiles upwards and all sorts of colored outfits delighting attendants. An event like this is not just a political affair—it's a cultural exchange.

Tommy finds himself enthralled by the whirlwind, dancing between people and ducking under elbows when he can. He's used to being the center of attention at parties—for once, he's nearly invisible at times. Sure, he finds himself at the emperor and empress's side more than once. People still talk politics, and he's the centerpiece of those conversations. But otherwise, this is a celebration. Tommy finds that he can duck and weave and hide without much issue.

It reminds him of when he was smaller. Back when the war was brand-new or just on the horizon, something for him to ignore. Parties thrown for him—had it been his eighth birthday when he'd knocked over the chocolate fountain? Or maybe his ninth. Regardless, Tommy doesn't mind parties. It's the whole 'being-looked-at' part that never sits right with him.

A lifetime of being king has yet to get him used to it.

At one point, General Technoblade finds him. Of all people to see at a place like this.

“Hey,” he says, hand on Tommy’s shoulder. He drags him back and away from one of the long tables where Tommy is very sneakily trying to get a glass of bubbly liquid. “What are you doing?”

“What are *you* doing?” Tommy easily counters. He hasn’t seen Technoblade in a day, at least. The general stayed at Philza’s side, usually— clearly, he’s been keeping tabs on Tommy tonight. “Let me go, I’m thirsty.”

“Not for that,” Technoblade says, sounding slightly amused. “How old are you again? Nine?”

“Shut up,” Tommy hisses, only slightly embarrassed. “I’ve had alcohol before.”

“Age of majority in the Empire is sixteen,” Technoblade says. “You’re two years short, pup.”

“Fuck you.” Tommy shrugs his hand off. “I’m royalty. I can do what I please.”

“Not here.” Technoblade’s voice is firm. “Leave it. Phil won’t be having you make a fool of yourself tonight. Nor will I.”

“Will you quit acting like *you* care?” Tommy asks, scowling deeply. Technoblade looks unmoved— he’s still in armor, glimmering with enchantments. “I know you don’t. It’s okay. You don’t have to lie to me, about wanting me to keep my reputation as is. It’s already ruined.” He never had a very good one to begin with, either. He knows what others think of him— and it hurts, but he knows most rumors are false. Despite that, for a moment, tears still well up and threaten to burst out.

Technoblade is stoic. “Reputation means nothing to me,” he says. “It’s Phil’s request.”

“Bullshit,” Tommy calls. “Reputation means something to everyone. You got pretty pissed off last time I mentioned yours.”

“I’m just as human as you,” Technoblade says. “I’m prone to emotion.”

“That’s not what *people* say,” Tommy spits out, then turns on his heel and darts into the crowd. He can hear the general calling out his name behind him, but Tommy’s got plenty of experience ducking his guard. He’s not aiming to make it out of the room— just across it, and as far away from that man as humanly possible.

He ends up pressed against a blue curtain, a huddle of ladies in front of him. One is in blue, another black— he recognizes one from the discussion meetings. She’s part of Sam’s committee, loud and opinionated. Her name had been Bo, or Beau— something like that. Tommy had bantered with her a bit in recesses. She’d been harsh, but fun. He can recognize her from laughter alone as she talks with the two other women.

“—not going well,” she says, sighing heavily. “The little Isles brat is stubborn as all hell.”

Tommy sinks into the curtains like maybe he’ll be absorbed into them.

“Well, you know what they say,” one of the other girls says. They all lean in, grins each on painted faces. “Apparently he was dragged to the capital kicking and screaming.”

“He’s got balls, I’ll give him that. Annoying, but ballsy. Good to have in a king.”

“Yeah, but you know what they did in the Isles. People suffered under him. Terrible policies.”

Hey. His policies weren’t terrible. They were wartime policies, sure, not great, but terrible is stretching it.

“I was traveling to Osprey once,” one of the girls says, voice now a little more hushed. “In the midst of the war. I was smaller, but we stopped in a village by the Kirnach. The townspeople said they were haunted by a brakud. A horrid, thin creature that stole their infants right out of their cribs.” They lean in closer. “My mother told me later that she doesn’t think there was a brakud at all. Just desperate, hungry parents who couldn’t feed their children any longer.” A gasp ripples across the group, hands lifted to mouths and eyes welling with tears.

“That’s terrible,” the girl in black says. “All while the Isles had food to spare.”

*That’s not true*, Tommy wants to say, wants to barge his way in and scream. *It’s not my fault*. Dread is rising up in his stomach as he listens; he’d just said to Technoblade himself that his reputation was terrible and he knew it already, but hearing it like this is different. It hurts. It’s like what he implied to Technoblade a minute ago, but leagues worse.

Tommy ducks out from the curtain, letting it flutter behind him. He doesn’t care if they notice or not— it won’t matter, in the end. He shoves his way across the hardwood, the gold suddenly suffocating around his neck.

It’s all too much. Nothing is going right for him. He’s a prisoner of war, and everyone hates him. He’s got no one on his side— not even his own advisors, who petition for surrender from him daily. He can’t lose the Isles. Not so shamefully. Dream’s disappointed tone rings in his ears every time he imagines it.

He finds an open door out to one of the balconies on the other end of the ballroom. Behind him, music rings out over the crowd as a circle forms in the center, people from every kingdom on the Continent celebrating his demise. Shaking fingers scrabble at his breast as he tears through the pins and decorations, until he’s gotten the emerald broach off and set firmly in his palm. He storms his way out onto the balcony— blessedly empty, thank Prime— and lets the cool night air soothe the red burn in his cheeks.

Tommy lifts his arm and chucks the broach as far as he can off the side of the stronghold.

It’s not... elegant. It’s not perfect. It’s a release, and that’s what he needs. After a second of his breath coming in heavy pants, he tears another pin from his chest and throws it as well. If he still had his crown, that would be next.

But he doesn’t have it. He doesn’t even know where it is. Lost in the battle, surely. Looted at some point. Or perhaps, sitting among the wreckage of his palace still. Maybe it never left his bedroom that morning. He’d been coronated in that crown when he was barely more than a year old. They’d draped him in fine silks and the crown that his father and his fathers before him had worn, too big for his tiny head. They’d painted a portrait, and hung it in the hall.

Dream used to show him it, on late nights. “Look,” he’d say. “It’s you. Your eyes are so blue, Tommy. You look like a spoiled little prince.” And Tommy would stubbornly argue that he wasn’t spoiled, and Dream would hold him on his hip, Tommy’s arms around his neck, and they’d laugh.

He misses Dream.

He misses being home.

Homesickness is not new. But this is the first time actual nausea rips up his throat. Behind him is a party packed with hundreds of people, and beyond him is a city with thousands of souls. He can see the lanterns from here, and see the light of parties in the street. The whole city is celebrating.

Tommy has never felt more alone. Insignificant. He grips the railing of the balcony and bends forward, hair covering his eyes as he gnaws on his lip until it bleeds.

After a few minutes, he lifts his head. His eyes feel strangely dry, but he raises his hand and wipes his cheeks off carefully. Presses the heels of his palms to his eyes, takes a few deep breaths. He’s okay, he tries to convince himself. He can handle this. It’s a party. Get through it and go back to bed.

Tommy turns to move back inside, and promptly slams into someone who’s darting across the balcony behind him.

The force of their bodies together is jolting. It drags him into reality. “Oh, I’m– sorry,” Tommy says, even though he was the one who nearly fell on his ass. The person who’d run into him wobbles, hopping backwards onto one foot and then lifts his other hand, brushing back the fringe of his hair with his palm.

“Hold this,” he demands, shoving some kind of– box? He shoves a box into Tommy’s hand, the metal sleek against his fingers. “Thanks!”

“Wait– what is this?” Tommy asks. He gets no answer as the guy in front of him bows his head and arranges Tommy’s hands, pulling the box to the center of his hands and making him hold it as he pops open some sort of hinge on the back. The first thing to hit Tommy is the smell of gunpowder– the next is the shimmer of redstone.

“Machine,” the guy grunts.

“Oh Prime,” Tommy says faintly. “You’ve handed me a fucking bomb.”

“Hardly!” The guy looks up again– no the boy looks up at him, one brown eye and one slightly clouded over, blueish in the lights of the grand hall. Tommy nearly startles at the sheer volume of scar tissue spattered on the left side of his face. “There’s not enough gunpowder in here for that. Well, if I’m gonna be honest, it might be enough to take your fingers off. However! It already blew up a second ago, so you’re fine.”

“Pardon?” Tommy gapes down at him. “What the hell is it???”

“A Talking Box!” The kid grins, tipping his head downwards again to fiddle some more. “The gunpowder was an experiment. It didn’t work.”

“Tubbo?” A voice rings out over the balcony, and Tommy whips his head around in surprise. “It started yelling at me— oh! Oh. Hi. Hello.”

“Hello,” Tommy says with a scowl as he comes face-to-face with one of the members of Libra’s council. Ranboo, in all his ridiculously tall, awkward glory. He’s dressed in black and white tonight, hair slicked back but still half-and-half, and he’s holding a second, identical box to the one currently in Tommy’s hands. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I— I was, well, I was—”

“Helping me,” Tubbo says firmly, sticking his tongue out and twisting two wires together. “Ranboo, did you at least hear me when it gave out?”

“No,” the taller boy says. “Just fuzzy stuff.”

“It exploded. I think the gunpowder idea is a bust,” Tubbo says, and Tommy blinks, shaking his head slightly.

“What the hell is going on?” He finally blurts out. “You two know each other? And why are these boxes supposed to be talking? What?”

“Ranboo and I are engaged!” Tubbo chirps happily, then slams the side of the box shut and latches it into place. “Let me see yours, Boo.”

“Engaged. Boo,” Tommy says incredulously. And then, with laughter already gathering at the back of his throat, “*Boo* .”

“It’s a politics thing. Tubbo,” Ranboo hisses, holding out his metal box despite the flush on his cheeks. “*Tubbo* . You know who that is, right?”

“Who?” Tubbo asks, glancing up and then back at Tommy. “Oh, him?”

“He’s the— Tubbo, I’m—”

“You’re the former king of the Isles, aren’t you?” Tubbo asks, grinning. One of his front two teeth is chipped.

“Former,” Tommy breathes out. “I *am* a king and you just— you— you—” Stuttering. He’d thought he’d outgrown the nasty habit like Dream had taught him, but apparently not. He’s a bit overwhelmed at the moment, and the presence of the councilmember and this strange kid with talking metal boxes is all— it’s a bit much. He’d already come out on the balcony to get away from the crowd and heat, and now this small gathering is still too much.

“Hey,” someone says quietly, and the pressure from the box is taken from his hands, warm fingers slipping into his own instead. “Hey. Deep breath in, long one out. C’mon, boss man.”

Deep breath in, long breath out. Tommy can do that. In and out, in and out, until the fuzzy black spots have cleared from his vision. All he can see now is Tubbo's face and the wrinkled skin around the other teenager's eye, the way it's tight and tense. It looks like it's still on fire.

"What happened to you?" Tommy gasps out, when he's got his voice back.

"Don't— it's okay, Ranboo, give me a second— it's okay. Valid question." Tubbo smiles. There's the chip again. Tommy blinks. "Blew myself up when I was eleven. I was dumb."

"Still are," Ranboo says, somewhere in the background. Tubbo just laughs.

"I was apprenticed under Sam," he continues, giving Tommy's fingers a squeeze. "Overthrew him with an irrigation system and was part of a committee for a while, but I hated it. Gave it up so I could keep trying new things."

"That's why you're not in diplomatic meetings," Tommy reasons. "Not a committee member."

"Exactly." Tubbo lets his hands drop from Tommy's, and the cool air is good. He spreads his fingers apart and then curls them, relishing in the crack of his knuckles. "And you know Ranboo already."

"Unfortunately," Tommy says. Ranboo comes into view once more, and he's got a frown on his face now.

"Hey," he says. "Not fair."

"I have to say that," Tommy insists. "By principle."

After a second of squinting, Ranboo nods. "Okay," he says. "*That's* fair."

"Hey!" Tubbo's fingers come into Tommy's line of sight, snapping a bit. "Gonna pass out? Or are you alright now?"

"I'm fine," Tommy says, waving a hand in front of his face and batting away Tubbo's fingers. "Are you always this fucking rude?"

"Do kings usually swear this much?" Tubbo asks, a question for a question. "I've never met one personally, so."

"Now you have," Tommy says. "And yes. All the time. You should hear Philza behind closed doors."

"I'd rather not," Tubbo admits, tipping his head. "But it might be interesting."

"Stop trying to study people, Tubbo," Ranboo says, a hand landing on Tubbo's shoulder as the other comes around, glancing at Tommy apologetically. "I'm sorry about his...everything."

“Rude,” Tubbo comments, bringing a foot down on Ranboo’s toes. The taller boy winces, but that’s the extent of his reaction.

“It’s okay,” Tommy says through muted laughter. “I– it’s– well, it’s kind of–”

“Nice?” Tubbo pipes up. Ranboo slaps a hand over his mouth.

“Different,” Tommy finishes.

They stand there for a second, the wind whipping across the valley. It whistles. Tommy resists the urge to whistle back.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Ranboo offers a second later. He’s very expressive– Tommy can tell just from looking at him how awkward and out of depth the other teenager feels. He feels the same, sure, but he’s not about to *show* it. “Non-officially.”

“You too,” Tommy says cordially. Tubbo says something, muffled, and then Ranboo is pulling his hand away from his mouth and grimacing, wiping his fingers on his pants.

“Gross,” he complains as Tubbo grins victoriously. “You’re so disgusting.”

“Pros of being a nobody,” Tubbo points out. “It’s nice.”

“I wish I was nobody,” Tommy says. It just slips out– he doesn’t know he’s about to say it until he does. Ranboo’s eyes go wide in surprise, but Tubbo hardly flinches.

“Well I’d say,” he says. “You’re a king! That’s stressful! No way you could get me to do that!”

“Exactly,” Tommy continues, a slight thrill running through him at the thought. Exactly. He doesn’t want to be anybody. He doesn’t want to have the threat of a decision too big for one person on his head anymore. He wants to worry about tiny exploding metal boxes and boys with scars on their faces. That would be nice. “I– yeah. Yeah.”

“Well, you can hang out with us if you want,” Tubbo says with a wide smile. “I’m gonna try something else to make these work.”

“I’m still not sure what they’re supposed to do,” Tommy reminds him. “Only that they explode.”

“They’re not supposed to do that,” Ranboo says helpfully. Tommy rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling despite himself.

“No shit,” he says. And then, quieter, “This stays here. Tonight.”

“Here and tonight,” Ranboo says quietly. A silent agreement. He’s smiling back.

“On pain of death,” Tommy threatens, pointing a finger at him and scowling. “I’ll kill you if you tell anyone. I’m serious.”

“Dead serious?” Ranboo asks, and Tubbo cackles. Tommy bites his lip to keep from laughing— shoving his finger into the other boy’s face and poking him in the cheek repeatedly.

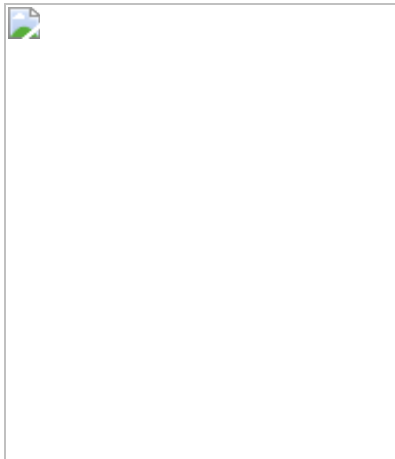
“Shut up, shut up, shut up, Tubbo— Tubbo, tell me about your dumb little box shit. What is it. Why.”

“Okay! Okay! Well, you see, I thought it’d be cool if we could talk using metal—” Tommy watches as Tubbo’s face warps into a wide grin, turning the box over and over in his hands. Words wash over him in a wave of calm, of mild satisfaction. Tommy doesn’t trust either of them (he can’t trust anyone these days, not even his own advisors) but that’s okay. Tubbo is fun, and Ranboo is... something. He’s not about to waste this opportunity.

Something catches his attention in the corner of his eye. He’s not sure what makes him look up, peering back inside the balcony doors and glancing over the crowd of nobility and civilians, politicians and advisors. Wilbur’s there, surrounded by a gaggle of people on the far right. Music swells in a crescendo, violin riding high on the sea of people.

And there, in the center.

A flash of familiar honey-blond hair.



## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

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:)



so! new characters!!! tubbo and ranboo have entered the ring!!!!!! i would like you all to know that no one is innocent in this fic- EXCEPT FOR TUBBO. he's just a guy and we love him we really do thanks tubbo love u bossman /parasocial. i love writing benchtrio so much they're so fun and once u get into the dynamic its just. SO FUN. :D

thoughts? comments? concerns? :) let me know down below and stay tuned for the next chapter . leave a kudos if you're enjoying!

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also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

## **arc II. - a dream is a wish your heart makes**

### Chapter Summary

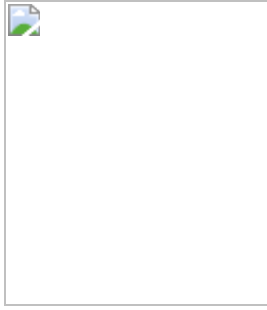
tws: mentions of the death of a child

this chapter was beta'd by the lovely TJ/definitelynotshouting!!!! incredible feedback, super good friend :)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)





He has no reason to think it's who he wants it to be. No proof, no reason, nothing more than the raw and utter yearning in his heart. They're in the middle of the Empire, in the center of the stronghold. There's no way Dream could've found his way here without getting captured or recognized. Tommy doesn't even know if the man had found his way out of the palace *alive* .

And yet, that tousled head of hair taunts him. Just a glance of it, and then it disappears out of reach.

Tubbo is still talking. Something about talking boxes and redstone and gunpowder, but Tommy doesn't care. He's spent enough time pretending to be interested (though to be fair, from what he's gathered, a talking box *is* quite interesting).

"If you'll excuse me," he says on instinct, not tearing his eyes away from the crowd. One of them says something behind him, but Tommy pays no attention. He steps through the doors and back into the ballroom, the cold evening air dissipating as he re-enters the crowd. He doesn't try for niceties— just pushes through the people milling about and circling around the mass of dancers in the middle. He ducks around a servant with a tray of drinks, careful not to knock their arm; if he's right, he doesn't want any attention on him. Thankfully, the emperor is at the front of the room, and General Technoblade is nowhere in sight.

He reaches the spot where he could've sworn he'd seen the flash of blond hair, and spins once in a circle. Plenty of partygoers are there, whirling in flashes of glistening color. Tommy scans them for any sign, any green, any yellow— purple, blue, fucking magenta, he doesn't care. Violin— or, no, that's viola actually, Tommy can tell when he catches a glimpse of the band playing along in the corner— soars. The notes are high and shrill and joyous, an upbeat dancing tune echoing across the way.

Another flash of gold. Tommy whips around, keeps himself calm, then reaches out with a hand to grasp the sleeve of the man. His head is turned away and Tommy feels like crying as he turns, tears burning as they gather in the corners of his eyes.

An unfamiliar face looks down at him.

"Excuse me?" They ask, and Tommy lets go of their arm as if it's burnt him. Prime, how could he be so fucking stupid? Of fucking course Dream isn't going to be here— the danger is too high. People know his face, his name, he'd always been at Tommy's right hand, why would he come to a high-profile event and just out himself like that? He stares at the blond man in front of him with the stranger's face and shakes his head briefly, as though to clear it.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, turning away. “I thought you were someone else.” Still muttering apologies, he flees, darting through people once more and fighting off the burning tears threatening to spill down his face. Prime. He’s so stupid; Dream isn’t dumb, that’s the thing, he wouldn’t risk coming here to see Tommy when the chance of being caught was so high.

A hand grips his upper arm, and suddenly he’s being pushed. Nearly off a fucking balcony as it comes to be, since the person shoves him straight through a large open window and out onto the terrace and cool air outside.

“What the *hell*—” he says, turning with a variety of choice words for the person currently holding his arm so tightly it might cut off circulation. But then it all falls away, because he’s counted every damn freckle on the face looking down at him.

“Calm down,” Dream says, a neat indigo suit with silver accents contrasting Tommy’s golden outfit as he holds him. His hair is brown and straight now (instead of it’s usual blond waves), face smooth and smile kind. “Don’t draw attention.”

“Dream,” Tommy breathes. Relief is utter and immediate— if not for the death grip on his arm, he might’ve fallen over entirely and *really* caused a scene. He’s alive. “You’re alive,” he says, breathless. “I thought I saw— you just—” Relief, followed quickly by anger and confusion, regret. “Why are you here? Where did you go, where have you *been* —”

“Busy keeping myself alive,” Dream mutters, as they duck behind a large group of gossipers that come towards the window and offer cover. They’re loud, too. Far too busy amongst themselves to notice two young men engaged in conversation behind them. It cuts them off from Philza’s view, and while Tommy hadn’t seen Technoblade, he trusts Dream to put them both out of relative sight. The balcony offers a little extra privacy.

“Is Sapnap okay?” Tommy finds himself asking before he can stop himself. Questions, questions. “George? Is— how did you—”

“I can tell you everything later,” Dream promises, both hands gripping Tommy’s shoulders now. He stares up into bright green eyes and beams, swallowing back a phlegmy, teary cough. Dream is staring at him— at first, with a cold, distant expression. But slowly, it morphs into something concerned. “Are you alright? Oh, Tommy, I’ve been so worried.”

“I’m fine,” Tommy insists. “Mildly traumatized, nothing I can’t handle.”

Dream’s hand finds his way to his cheek. “They haven’t hurt you?” He asks, tipping Tommy’s head this way and that.

“Not— well. Not a scratch anymore,” Tommy amends, thinking of the wounds he’d carried out of the palace with him. A runekeeper had seen to that quick enough. “King Philza’s an old, sympathetic codger.”

“Don’t underestimate him,” Dream says with half of a grin, “but your puppy eyes are pretty convincing.”

Tommy chews on his lip, still staring up at Dream. He knows they don't have long— his most trusted advisor, his *brother*, looks stressed, occasionally glancing up around them both. Watching for anyone who might cause trouble, or maybe a signal from anyone else who might be here in disguise.

“How did you get out?” he still finds himself asking. “Of the palace? You— you left me, in the throne room—”

“Oh, no, Tommy, come on.” Dream says, his attention snapping back to the young king. Immediately his features smooth out, hands drawing Tommy into a hug. *Finally*. Tommy tucks his head against the older man's shoulder and does his best not to cry. “Tommy, I would never have just left you. I went to get Sapnap, and— and— by the time we made our way back, the palace had been overridden. We had to run to survive. I knew they wouldn't kill you. Like you said, the emperor is a sympathetic guy.”

“They said they would,” Tommy says quietly, muffled into Dream's shoulder. “If I didn't surrender. I was so *scared*.” It's the first time he's admitted it to someone. Fear, unbridled and terrifying. He's never felt something so awful.

“I know,” Dream says gently, pulling back from the hug only a second later. “I'm so sorry for leaving you, Tommy,” he says, cupping one of Tommy's cheeks in his hand for a brief moment. Tommy leans into him, into the warmth. His face still feels cold from being outside, and Dream's hand nearly burns. “I didn't want to, but I knew I had to get out of there alive. I knew you'd be okay. Oh, Prime, I'm so glad you're okay. I had to come find you, make sure you were alright. I joined up with some Libran nobles just to get in here. Prime.” The same relief Tommy is feeling is reflected on Dream's face, open with worry. His hands flutter to and fro across Tommy's face, fingers settling strands of Tommy's hair and smoothing across his cold cheeks. But even now, his gaze flicks up and away.

“We don't have much time, do we?” Tommy asks quietly. Dream shakes his head.

“It's too dangerous,” he says quietly. “Philza's got a thousand eyes on you. I only risked this because you needed to know I'm still here. And I needed to see you.”

“He wants me to surrender,” Tommy tells him. “Entirely. Everyone's telling me to do it.”

“Don't,” Dream says firmly, and Tommy nods. “Not yet. Maybe...”

The ‘*eventually*’ hangs in the air between them, but Tommy inhales. “They'd have to kill me first,” Tommy assures him. “The Isles are my everything.”

Dream smiles, one corner of his mouth pulling up farther than the other. He pats Tommy's cheek firmly. “That's my king,” he says fondly, and Tommy just beams. The praise sinks into his bones and melts along his spine, nothing like when Wilbur calls him something similar. Maybe it's just the familiar tones of Dream's voice, his accent, or how he doesn't hesitate to slip from Common into Sinda to speak with Tommy. He's nowhere near his home, but it's the closest he's felt in weeks.

“I have to go,” Dream says. “But I’m in the city. Sapnap and George are in Osprey, waiting for me to send for them when I’ve got space. Keep holding on for us, alright?”

Tommy thinks of the cold Yellow Room that’s slowly becoming his, and the diplomatic meetings drenched in pity.

“Alright,” he nods. Then, more jokingly, “Rescue me soon, though.”

“I’m doing my best,” Dream promises. “I left people in Caterwaul, and have contacts along the way back to the Isles. We’ll get home, Tommy, even if it takes a few months. Be prepared to stay here for a little while, okay?”

The idea sinks dread into his stomach, but Tommy nods. “Okay,” he breathes. More seriously now: “Please don’t leave me. Not again.”

“I won’t,” Dream says, then holds his hand out. All fingers tucked into his palm except his pinky. Tommy meets him halfway, linking fingers and grinning at each other. Matching scars on their palms. Brothers. “If we can’t win this war on the front lines,” Dream says quietly, dangerously, “then we’ll do it from here. I have an idea, but I need to know you’re all in.”

“Anything,” Tommy says gently. Their pinkies are still interlocked, and he gives them a quick shake. “I’d give up all my women, all the riches in the world just to be home.”

“Good,” Dream says, eyes glinting. He glances up once and around, then pulls his hand back from Tommy’s. “I have to go. Do you know what room you’re sleeping in?”

“Kr– the, uh, the empress said it was called the Yellow Room,” Tommy suggests. By the look on Dream’s face, that’s helpful.

“Okay,” he says, then breathes out through his nose heavily. Rocks on his toes. Tommy resists the urge to pull him into another hug– Dream is so incredibly stressed right now, and he can’t imagine what’s going on inside his head. “Okay. Not tonight. But soon.”

“Promise,” Tommy demands. “Promise me.”

“I just did,” Dream points out, looking down at their hands.

“Out loud,” Tommy says.

“...I promise,” Dream says, nodding quickly. He squeezes Tommy’s hand, and then gently weasels his way out of his grip. He looks across the room again, paranoia written as clear as day across his face. “Hey,” he says a moment later. “I need to get out without anyone noticing me. Wanna help?”

Tommy grins.

Despite Technoblade’s insistence earlier in the night that Tommy doesn’t drink, he finds himself a glass of wine in under a minute. It’s blood red, dark maroon swirling in the bowl.

It's sticky and bittersweet when he lifts it to his mouth, the alcohol stinging his tongue.

He didn't get a glass to drink, though. Oh no. This is about to serve a far more amusing purpose.

It's easy to pick a target— there's a girl in cream standing by the side of the room, breath coming quick like she's just stepped off the dance floor. Her dress is long and her hair is pulled up into strips of silvery cord, braids trailing down her shoulders. As she chats with another girl beside her, there's a look on her face that Tommy can place anywhere. Stubbornness, through and through.

She'll make a scene. It's perfect. Tommy scurries his way through the crowd, clutching his wine glass close to his chest, making sure not to get a single drop on his own outfit. That wouldn't be ideal, but at the same time... Dream *had* told him to make a scene.

He ducks his head a little lower, takes a few more steps, and trips.

The glass in his hand goes flying. One arm out wide, moving to try and catch himself. He tucks his shoulder, aims, and hides his grin as the wine goes everywhere. A shriek rises above the music, which softens, but doesn't stop.

The girl he'd chosen as a target is painted in red. His trip had done the job. Wine drips down the front of her gorgeous cream gown, gathers on her eyelashes and only smears when she rubs her hand against the ever-growing stain. She shrieks a second time, and Tommy rights himself, then promptly drops the glass. It shatters.

"I'm so sorry," he immediately says. Damage control. The girl is glaring at him, glass shards decorating the floor between them. "I didn't— I— I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking—"

"Of course you weren't looking!" she gasps, voice shrill with upset. Shoulders tense, hands trying desperately to clean herself up. Another girl is at her side— it's the one in black from before, the ones who had been talking about the brakud. Beau, Tommy thinks. "This probably cost more than your—" Beau tips her head, whispers something into the girl's ear, and she shuts up. Yeah, Tommy doesn't think the dress costs more than his life. Not right now. Her face flushes even more. "Your Highness," she grits out.

"You," Beau says, shoving her finger towards Tommy's face, "are causing problems."

"It was an accident," Tommy points out. That is a lie. He does not care— he's good at lying.

"You need to watch your step, your Majesty," Beau fires right back. Beneath the thin veneer of politeness, her words are bitter and angry. "I don't believe you can afford mistakes like this."

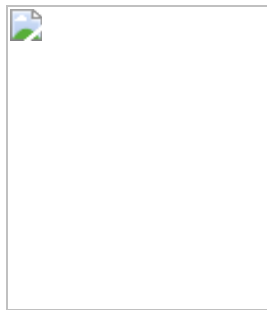
"I'll cover the cost of the dress," he offers. Around them, people stare. Good. Tommy raises his voice. "But maybe she shouldn't have gotten in my way."

"How dare you," the girl hisses. Beau's face is dark. The girl with the stained dress steps forward, fists clenched. "How dare you! Disgraced—"

“Enough. Thomas,” Technoblade is bellowing, voice low and dark as the crowd parts to let him through. Delight rises like the angry tide, filling him up from bottom to top. Dream is here. Dream is here, and Tommy is helping him get out without notice, and *everything will be alright*. Things are looking up for him, finally. Patience really was key. Tommy is not patient, but he will be if he has to be. He’s unable to keep the giddy delight from spilling over— Tommy cackles, grinning at the girl he’d provoked and then looks away from her angry face. He turns, finding the general already at his side. The girl has started to cry— messy tears, eyes puffy and red. “Are you serious?” Technoblade asks, fingers digging into the scruff of Tommy’s neck and hauling him backwards as his laughter soars upwards. “What is wrong with you?”

All eyes are on them, now. Every person in the room, staring right at Tommy. Even Philza is making his way towards Tommy, Kristin hot on his heels. For some reason, Tommy doesn’t feel nearly as panicked as he did every time before. He catches Wilbur in the crowd, a hand over his mouth, but eyes crinkled with amusement as he watches Tommy get hauled backwards.

“This night has taken a turn for the better,” Tommy cackles, squirming under Technoblade’s ironclad grasp. The general sighs.



Despite the events of the party, the next few days are quiet. Tommy is strangely moody— at times, he thinks of Dream and feels like he’s on top of the world. But as time passes and no one shows, he starts to think. What if he’s been abandoned again? The idea of Dream leaving him here in this cold palace fills him with panic. Stones lie on his chest, intense pressure choking him whenever he indulges the thought. On the third night after the party, he can’t even sleep.

Meetings consume his days. Constant vigilance, constantly denying Philza his victory. The emperor is getting more and more frustrated— Tommy can see it in the way his responses become short and clipped. Tommy is allowed less and less freedom (Kristin stops visiting him, the third day. He won’t admit it to anyone, but it sends him spiraling). Even Wilbur ignores him when he prods; poking and annoying the older boy does nothing to attract his attention. Tommy is escorted to diplomacy meetings. He’s escorted back to his room. Meals are taken inside, and Tommy watches his first snowfall from a window. Five days.

Five days pass and Tommy follows Dream’s instructions. Stand strong, and do not surrender. Tommy isn’t allowed to attend any more parties, not that he’s complaining. Philza seems to be under the impression he’s won, and celebrates as such. The diplomats know better.



He approaches the topic one day, sitting in the Sunrise Room with paperwork spread out ahead of him. Tommy isn't cruel— they've started the process of sending shiploads of grain to the Empire's ports. He'd seen the bodies in Osprey. That had been enough for him to want to provide relief.

"Philza," he says, shattering the previous silence of the room. Save for the scratch of pen on paper, it had just been him and the emperor sitting and looking over documents. Tommy is dreadfully bored. Doodles decorate the corners of the papers he'd been looking at. Even General Technoblade is gone, sent away by the emperor himself earlier in the afternoon. Tommy's surprised none of the other diplomats put up much of a fight— Sam especially seems concerned, constantly asking after Tommy and his well being. It's a little annoying. It's a little nice, being cared about.

"Yes?" Philza asks without looking upwards.

"Why are you acting like you've already won?" Tommy asks, putting his thoughts to air as bluntly as possible. "I see the celebrations. The city hasn't slept since we arrived."

"I'd like you to look me in the eyes and tell me that I've lost," Philza says, looking up from his paper for a brief second. They lock eyes— an ocean versus sky. Tommy opens his mouth, and finds that nothing will come out. Philza smiles.

"You cannot have a winner without a loser," he says, and looks back down at his hands. Tommy gapes for a while.

The implication is clear. Philza is not pretending he's won already— he believes he has. Maybe it's true. Maybe Tommy is beating a dead horse; doubt comes in, Tommy leaning back in his seat and staring across the table, out the window. Snow has fallen once since the party, but by now it's long melted. The meadows of Crow's Chasm stare back at him, and Tommy pretends like he isn't internally having his largest freakout yet.

Dream hasn't come for him yet. It's been nearly a week, and all he's done is stall. The end is inevitable.

He nearly surrenders right there and then.

He doesn't, though. The idea of Dream's potential disappointment is too great. He seethes instead, staring down at the paperwork before him and getting nothing done for the rest of the day. A tiny rebellion.

That night, however.

That night, Tommy can't sleep. It's not panic tonight— no, it's the moon. Full as an apple, bright as the sun, it shines through the curtains where Tommy had left them open. The line of white light pales the room, dusting over the trinkets he'd stolen over the course of his first week here. More than once, Tommy finds his hand grasping at his chest, but the brooch is long gone. He'd thrown it off the balcony and hasn't seen it since.

He dozes. Drifting in that liminal space between awake and asleep, Tommy's mind roams. He dances through the stars and signs paper after paper— there are treaties to think about, Sam to please, Philza to ignore. Tommy hasn't had a casual conversation with anyone in ages, and so he finds himself chatting pleasantly with the figurine of Prime.

*Lady*, he says, blinking in the moonlight. *Did you know that fire can burn you even if you don't touch it?*

*Where have you touched fire before?* she asks, lips curled upwards in a perpetual smile. Tommy smiles back, tucking his hands under his cheek and sighing.

*Every fireplace I see*, he says. *I like to feel the heat. But sometimes it hurts.*

*That's to be expected*, Prime chides him gently. *Silly.*

*Don't call me silly.*

*What am I to call you then, Your Majesty?*

*Not that.* Tommy grimaces. *Anything but that.*

*Whatever you want, Tommy*, Prime says. *You haven't seen me in a while.*

*Haven't really had the chance to find a chapel*, Tommy points out. *Are you mad?*

*Never*, Prime soothes. *Never.*

*Thanks.*

*Of course.*

A shadow passes over the window.

At first, Tommy suspects it's a bird. True to its name, the Empire's capital city is full of corvids. He's seen all manner of crows and ravens decorating the stronghold's spires, black dots peppering the horizon at sunset. They're everywhere. But the shadow lingers. It blocks out the moonlight entirely, covering the window and the sliver of curtain Tommy had left open. The room is plunged into darkness, the Prime figurine obscured. He can't see anything at all. Tommy inhales and then holds his breath, cheeks puffing out just a tad as he waits.

Gently, a cold rush of air spills over his face. The curtains flicker, and in the flashes of moonlight that come with it, he thinks he sees—

Tommy sits up and opens his mouth, breath spilling out in a half-wail before a hand covers his mouth. The bed dips as someone crawls onto it, a *kharvaa* obscuring the lower half of their face. It's cobalt blue.

Assassination is ugly, but Tommy doesn't put Emperor Philza above it.

He immediately struggles, lashing a hand out and slapping the arm that's pinning him down. The person doesn't budge, dark hair loose around their shoulders.

"Shhh," they insist, and then in one smooth move, pulls down their mask. "Calm down."

They speak Sindan. Tommy recognizes the accent and language immediately, settling down against his bed and glaring upwards. The person— Tommy thinks it's a guy— is tan, dark hair, and one dark eye. The other is faded and cloudy, sat neatly in the middle of a scar that creeps all the way from the man's collar to his eyebrow. It splits his face apart in a way that's intimidating, but Tommy refuses to be scared.

"Shh," he says again. "I'm going to lift my hand. Don't scream. Got it?"

Tommy nods roughly. The man raises a brow, pauses, and then slowly lifts his hand from Tommy's mouth.

He doesn't scream. Instead he takes a breath, inhaling harshly in the low light of the Yellow Room.

"Who are you?" Tommy demands. "Tell me now."

"I'm not telling you my name for safety's sake," the man says, leaning back on his heels. He's half on the bed, half off, looking as though he's about to dart away and back out the window. "But I will tell you who to find. This is a message from Dream, gotchya?"

"Dream." Tommy blinks. "Really?"

"Sure is," the man says, watching him with care.

"...if I don't wake," Tommy says. He waits. After a second, the man's face cracks into a wide, giddy smile.

"I dream," he finishes the saying. It's something Dream and Tommy had come up with ages ago, when Tommy was even smaller. Something to make sure a message was coming from the other, or to know who to trust in tough situations. Tommy heaves a sigh.

"What is it?" he asks. "Why has it been so long?"

"Sneaking into an Empire stronghold is harder than you think," the man says, plopping backwards onto his butt. He leans forward, stretching long arms out across Tommy's bedsheets. "I just climbed like, a gazillion feet. My fucking shoulders, man."

"Uh." Tommy leans backwards a bit, giving the man room to stretch. "Okay."

"I don't have too much time," the intruder says after a second, popping his shoulder with a wrench and a crack. Tommy winces. "I've got to get back out, too, so. Look, I can't tell you much now. But you've got allies, your little Highness."

"Excuse me?" Tommy asks. The man doesn't even stop talking.

“And one of them is right here in the palace already. No, it’s not my handsome mug, stop lookin’ at me. It’s a different handsome mug– his name’s Karl, and he works in the library. With the books, not the scrolls. You need to find him and talk to him. Sound good?”

“Why the hoops?” Tommy asks. “Why can’t Dream just come get me? Or can you carry me down? How about that?” He thinks of the cliffs below his window and gnaws on his lip. The man shakes his head, and Tommy is instantly grateful. Maybe that’s not a good idea.

“Nope,” the man says, popping the p. “Gotta make sure everything’s secure. I don’t even know the plan. But you need to know the plan, so here I am. The in-between man.” He pauses. “You know, I could probably make a song out of that.”

“What?” Tommy barks out a breathless laugh, and then bites his own tongue to keep from being too loud. “Oh Prime, what is *going on* –”

“Look.” The man’s hand lands on Tommy’s shoulder, and he stiffens. “There are still people loyal to your crown,” he says, tone suddenly serious. “I can’t risk coming to bring you messages, but Karl is one of them and he’s already worked here for ages. You need to find him, and Dream’ll get you the plan. Karl’s–”

“In the library, right,” Tommy says.

“He’s got brown hair,” the man continues. “Purple eyes, though. He’s from Libra. Really pretty– kind of swirly when you look at them close up. A babyface, but it’s cute. He makes it work.”

Tommy stares.

“His hands are really soft,” the man continues, and oh boy. Tommy winces again. “Not in a weird way, just in a– you know what, I think I have to go.”

“I think you do too,” Tommy says, and lifts his hand to nudge the man’s shoulder. He grins one last time at Tommy before pulling his *kharvaa* back up over his nose, letting the loose fabric flutter down to his neck. His scar is still visible– and the clouded eye, a shade lighter than it’s sibling beside it.

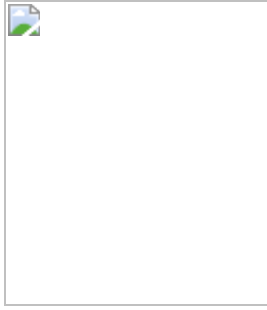
“Good luck, kinglet,” he says. “I’m on your side. If I don’t wake?”

“I dream,” Tommy finishes. The man turns back towards the window and Tommy reaches out for a moment, sheets pooling around his waist as he leans forward just enough to snag one of the curtains and pull it back. Half out the window, the intruder turns. Tommy stammers for a moment. “Tell– tell him. Tell him I miss him?”

With a soft glint in his eye, the man nods.

And then he’s gone. The window shuts, and curtains flutter down to where they’d been before. Or– no. They close entirely, shadowing the room.

Tommy lies back against his pillows and does not sleep.



He has to get to the library.

His objective is simple— get to the library and find a guy with brown hair named Karl, who works with the books. Tommy considers trying to sneak off; it's a possibility, and he's had a lifetime of slipping past guards and going unnoticed. But that was at home in his own palace, where the guards wouldn't question his presence in an otherwise empty hallway. He had enough power there to send a personal escort away. Not here.

Especially not when his personal escort is General Technoblade.

The man's taken to following Tommy around like a hawk. Tommy is constantly under his gaze when he's not in the Sunrise Room with Philza and the other diplomats. Technoblade is the first face he sees in the morning when he exits his room, and the last he sees before tucking himself in at night.

Tommy's starting to fantasize about punching the older man in the nose. The crack would be satisfying. He just has to figure out a way to get up there. Maybe he could try a stool, but that's just stupid. Still, it's nice to imagine smacking his fist into Technoblade's face as they walk down the halls, a warm grey cloak around Tommy's shoulders fighting off the constant chill.

"I feel like I've never seen you without armor," Tommy says the next morning. He's exhausted— he's gotten next to no sleep the night before trying to think of a way to get to the library. He gets more talkative when he's sleepy, which doesn't particularly bode well for the rest of the day. "Do you sleep in it?"

"Don't be absurd," Technoblade scolds. He walks without sound, an owl in the night. Even his armor is quiet. Tommy tips his head, trying to unscramble and lengthen the runes etched onto the metal. "Hey."

"Unbreaking," Tommy deciphers. "Thorns. You wear thorns inside?"

Technoblade grunts. "Not always."

"You're just asking for someone to bump into you," Tommy says, and then promptly veers to the side. Technoblade sidesteps just as quickly, and they both nearly go tumbling into one of the tapestries lining the hall. Tommy grasps the thick woven fabric in one hand, grinning absently into the air between them.

"Be careful," General Technoblade insists, tugging him up after a moment, hands rough.

“I’m tired,” Tommy informs him. The general sighs, and nudges them back along their path to the Sunrise Room.

“Get over it,” Technoblade says. “We’re all tired.”

“Protection IV,” Tommy spits out. “Your armor is standard class, but the enchantments are really well-done.”

“Do you want to know a secret?” Technoblade asks. He sounds exasperated. Tommy nods.

“Yes.”

“There are more enchantments written on the inside, where you can’t see. Surprises,” Technoblade explains. Tommy stares. It’s not an uncommon practice, not at all– but for some reason, he can’t get the thought out of his head. On the opposite side of the metal, even more glowing carvings that bear magic into the world. He stares long and hard at Technoblade’s chestplate, like perhaps he’ll be able to flip it over in his mind and examine the fine inner workings.

“I had armor,” Tommy finds himself saying. “I got a new set each year. Sometimes twice a year. Because I would grow so fast.” He’s not sure where it is now. Lying on the floor of some palace, maybe. Melted down for scrap. All that hard work, gone. “I think I’d like a new set,” he finds himself saying. Beside him, the general’s eyes are distant, staring towards the other end of the hallway like looking at it will make it come sooner.

“Mmm,” he says. No real response. Tommy wasn’t expecting one.

“And a sword,” he continues. “A real one. My old one was diamond-reinforced iron. Gold on the hilt, jewels up the middle. Pretty. I called it my knife, but it was much longer than any ordinary knife. I had plenty of real knives too. For shanking. In case anyone got too close, you know what I mean?”

“For someone who said he didn’t sleep last night,” Technoblade drawls, turning his head to stare down Tommy, “you are awfully chatty.”

Tommy feels his cheeks burn, and in the end, he’s the one who ends up looking away. “Old habits die hard,” he mutters. “It’s hard to remember where I am, sometimes.”

“That’s concerning.”

“You’re concerning. In fact, you’re a bore.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, especially from you.”

“Fuck off.” Tommy lifts his chin from his chest, from where he’d been staring at the floor as they’d walked. “Skip this meeting.”

“No.” Technoblade is firm.

“C’mon. Skip it with me. It’s boring, and all it’ll do is annoy Philza. They don’t need me there. I never talk.”

Technoblade sighs. “I said no, pup.”

“What are you, scared?” Tommy turns, walking backwards, clasping his hands behind his back as he does. Technoblade watches him, eyes hooded and dark. Tommy bares his teeth and leans forward slightly, balancing. “I think you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Technoblade argues. Rising to the bait. Good.

“Nervous, then,” Tommy amends, tipping his head. “To face Philza’s disappointment. I didn’t take you for a coward, General.”

He sees the moment Technoblade breaks, weighing it over in his mind. The meetings are boring, especially for Technoblade, who is obviously just there to be an intimidating force. Small victories, relative glories.

“Only this meeting,” he relents. “And I will be with you the whole time.”

“Fair enough,” Tommy nods, face aching from how hard he’s smiling. Then: “Does this stupid place have a library?”

They do, in fact. If Technoblade is surprised by the fact that Tommy asked to visit it, he hides it well. They change course, moving away from the Sunrise Room and into a few hallways that Tommy doesn’t think he’s ever seen before. Before long, Technoblade is stepping forward to catch Tommy by the shoulder and guide him towards a large carved door, the inscriptions bearing greetings in every language on the Continent. Even Ender– Tommy lifts a hand and lets it ghost over the most common greeting from the south. Then pushes the door open, and steps into a world of ink and parchment.

He never spent too much time in libraries. Most of his tutoring was done in a day room, or spent with Dream in various parts of the palace. He learned through action, not through reading about others doing. But he’d always liked the library back home– it’s arching high ceilings, honeycomb shelves packed to the brim with scrolls. The astronomy section had been his favorite, all of the star maps and charts depicting constellations. A childhood dream of his had been to be immortalized in the sky, one of the fabled characters.

The library in the Empire is a little different. They use books more often than scrolls, for one thing– the shelves here are lined with cracked spines and crumpled pages, any scrolls kept in the back where Tommy can just see the beginnings to the honeycomb system of organization that he has memorized at home.

The intruder last night has said Karl worked with the books, however, so he turns into the stacks and starts to prowl. He has no idea how long he’ll have before Technoblade gives in to his nerves and demands they go back, but he needs to find this librarian. Technoblade also

presents a second interesting issue; Tommy's not sure how he's going to talk to Karl with the man looming behind his back.

He'll figure it out. Wing it, if he has to.

"What drew you here?" Technoblade eventually asks. "I never took you for the reading type."

"I'm not," Tommy says, dragging his hands over a shelf and grimacing as it comes back dusty. "Looks like no one else is, either."

"This is the nonfiction section," Technoblade says, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

"Who reads nonfiction?" Tommy declares, making sure his voice is loud and booming. Project, so anyone who hears you can come help.

"I do," Technoblade says. If Tommy didn't know better, he'd think the man sounded a little hurt.

"Bore," Tommy reminds him. "You're a boring bore. Grandpa energy."

"Don't be childish," Technoblade chides, and then there's the sound of footsteps. Tommy ignores them—Technoblade does not, his head snapping in their direction. Tommy reaches up and pulls a particularly dusty book down, cracking it open. It smells musty, like all old books smell after a certain amount of time in storage. It's a good smell. The footsteps grow closer, and then

"Hello." A face comes into view, followed by long silver robes. Gentle hands, painted nails, brown hair, and purple eyes. Karl smiles at the two of them, hands floating in front of him with a book held gently in his grasp. "What brings you two into my library?"

Silence, for a moment. Then, gruffly, Technoblade grunts hello. Tommy glances back at him, then at Karl, then snaps the book shut and returns it to its place.

"Hello," he says. "I was bored. And now I'm here."

Karl's eyes glint. "Oh, cool! Are you looking for anything in particular?"

Tommy shakes his head. "No. I just didn't want to go to a meeting. Diplomacy is boring, and the general finally gave in to my charm—"

"And your whining," Technoblade butts in.

"—and brought me here." Tommy grins. "Actually. Do you have star charts?"

"Maybe." Karl smiles, moving to set down the book he's carrying and then gesturing. "This way."

They leave the nonfiction section behind them, the walls of books absorbing their echoing footsteps. They weave through the stacks as Karl leads them along, occasionally glancing



back and between the two. Tommy gets the message, but he's not sure if they're going to be able to get Technoblade out of earshot.

"I didn't sleep last night," he admits above the murmuring knowledge around them. "I looked outside, instead. The constellations here are different from home."

"Well, sure," Karl says. "We're way up north. Did you see Livia last night? It was near the horizon." The mention of the constellation, so familiar to Tommy, makes him ache.

"Yeah," he says through dry lips. "I did."

"You know what that tale says," Karl says kindly, stopping in front of one of the grand hexagonal bookshelves, scrolls packed tight all the way up to the ceiling. "If she doesn't wake."

"She dreams," Tommy repeats, smiling a little. A bastardization, but the message gets across. "In the stars."

Technoblade hums. "I know that tale," he says, but when Tommy turns to look at him he's brushing a hand over a smaller shelf of novels nearby. "Libra has a similar one."

"I didn't know that," Tommy admits. Karl taps his shoulder to get his attention once more, and he turns back to face him. The man is holding out a scroll, and gently, Tommy takes it in his own hands. When he goes to unroll it, however, Karl places a hand over his and very carefully shakes his head.

"Take this," he says. "It's a map of the night sky over Raven's Flight this time of year. Look at it tonight— see if you can learn some new constellations."

The message is clear. Tommy nods.

"Thanks," he says.

"But you have to return it," Karl continues. "This is a library, not a bookstore. Got it?"

"Property of the palace." A hand lands heavy on Tommy's shoulder and he jumps slightly, looking up to glare at Technoblade as he looms over his shoulder. "Alright. We've been here long enough."

"Coward," Tommy spits, feeling practically giddy with delight. Technoblade merely sighs and turns them both around. "Oh, come on, I didn't even get to look at it yet! It's been like five minutes."

"You can look tonight. You have work to do," Technoblade says, not unkindly. There's a bit of humor underneath his gruffness, something quieter. Something softer. "I didn't take you as the scholarly type."

"Yeah, well," Tommy says, looking back over his shoulder at Karl as he's nudged along towards the door. "I'm full of surprises."

Karl smiles back, lifting a hand in goodbye. Tommy waves back.

That night, Tommy pulls the scroll out of his pocket where he'd kept it all day, and gently unrolls the parchment.

It crinkles under his hands, well-worn in some places and smooth in others. Ink splatters across the page, delicate dots spelling out stars and celestial bodies that hover in the heavens above them. Tommy drags his hand across the ink as it unravels, spotting more than a few constellations etched in amongst the dots.

A bird is right at the top. Of course it is, what with this stupid kingdom's obsession with them.

As he continues to unfold the paper, something slips out from the very bottom. Fluttering to the floor, it disappears underneath the skirting of Tommy's bed. Carefully, he sets the scroll down on the bed, open, and gets on his knees. It only takes a moment to find the slip of paper, which turns out to be a normal-sized sheet folded up into tiny squares.

The handwriting is desperately familiar. There's no heading, no greeting, and no name at the bottom. But Tommy doesn't need a name to know this message is for him.

*Burn this after you read it.*

*Sorry it's been so long. I didn't want to leave you alone so long, but it's how it turned out. Necessary, now that I know you're not going to get hurt. You need to stay where you are and hunker down.*

*I know it's not an ideal circumstance, but it's one we have to accept for now. Your capture was pathetic and demoralizing, but it can be used for our own gain. Keep sharp and don't lose sight of the end goal—saying that, I've changed course of action. You need to surrender. Fully.*

*Tell Emperor Philza the Isles are his. I know it goes against everything I've ever told you, but you need to feign surrender. Let him see he's worn you down. Their pitiful looks towards you the other night makes it clear what they think of you. I know you're more than that. You **have** to be more than that—for us, for your home. For our home. We'll get there in due time.*

*Surrender, and relax. Build up some strength. These things take time to plan, and I need to stay low as well. Go along with whatever stupid parades Philza wants you to go upon. Make friends. Find allies. You're smart—you can do this. I'm with you. I'll see you soon.*

Tommy clenches the letter in his fist and fights the urge to tear it to bits.

The thing is, Dream's not wrong. Tommy's capture *was* pathetic. He felt as much, on the long journey north. He felt like an insolent child being punished, a dog brought to heel. He wanted nothing more than to bite, but circumstances kept him trapped. Even here, he knows he's just running in circles around the emperor. He had no long term plan—the taste of one is relief,

pure and simple. Like sugar water. Tommy stares down at the letter and lets his gaze drift over the words again and again.

*You **have** to be more than that.*

He can be. He can do what Dream asks of him, at least. He can make up for his horrendous mistake of allowing himself to be captured. Tommy can do this, even if it pains him immensely. The Opus Isles are his home and he does not want to just give them up like this. Pitifully.

Prime, Tommy *hates* feeling pitiful.

But he trusts Dream. Unequivocally, he trusts him. He's been there for Tommy, raising him since his father was assassinated; protected him, loved him, supported and taught him. Dream was his everything, and finally he's back and guiding Tommy once again. From afar, perhaps, but it's still guidance that Tommy is desperate for. Guidance that no one is giving him in this accursed Empire.

So with shaking hands, he turns towards the fireplace and casts the parchment onto the flames. The edges of the paper darken and curl inwards, splotches of soot marring the words, and then with a final gasp of air the paper is engulfed entirely. Tommy watches it burn.

Surrender. The mere thought of it makes Tommy want to jump off a cliff.

But he'd messed up— this is his penance. Quietly, he turns to look at the figurine of Prime on his shelf and stares for a moment. Her face smiles down on him. It almost looks approving.

It's a blow to his ego, not his heart. He'll be fine.

The next morning sees the sun rise over the frost, fire-lines cast upon the chasm and city. Flowers begin to wilt, although somehow there is always a fresh bouquet in the center of the diplomat's table. The Sunrise Room has become Tommy's second prison, and here he sits, holding a small piece of paper in his hands and turning it over and over.

He'd requested parchment last night, and spent hours agonizing over the contents of the letter in front of him. It's addressed to the emperor, formalities and all. Tommy even included a moniker of the king that had Dream sneering, once— Killza. It seemed fitting, lining up neatly beside *Commander of the Continent* and *Hero of the Falls* . Tommy's title isn't nearly as long. Although he'd heard some people in the boonies of the Isles had taken to calling him Tyrant.

He's not sure if he likes it or not.

Regardless, he's here, with Emperor Philza Minecraft Watson's title spelled neatly out in his own chicken-scratch handwriting. That had been one habit Dream hadn't been able to beat out of him; his handwriting is still atrocious, even to this day. He's at least made an effort this morning. He'd done his hair more carefully, spelled out each and every word in his head before writing it down. Tommy had eaten *breakfast* for Prime's sake. It's been an eventful morning.

And now his Grand Majesty is fucking late.

Tommy taps his foot. Across the table, Samuel from the Vaults eyes him.

“You look well this morning,” he finally says, broaching the topic with at least some amount of grace. Tommy’s surprised he’s lasted this long. “Your Highness.”

“Thomas is fine,” Tommy says off-handedly. General Technoblade isn’t even here. What on earth could be making them both late? Granted, Technoblade usually is either at Philza’s or Tommy’s side. Maybe something had happened. Maybe Tommy and Karl hadn’t been as subtle as they’d thought. The very notion of his scheming being found out makes Tommy want to violently hurl.

“Thomas, then,” Samuel amends. “Have you been sleeping alright?”

“Fine,” Tommy nods. “Well. No. That was a lie. I lied to you.”

“Oh,” Samuel says, a bit faintly. One of the Libran council members snickers.

“It’s all very stressful,” Tommy admits. “Diplomacy. You’re head of the committee— you would know.”

“I do,” Samuel agrees, dipping his head. He looks a little startled by Tommy’s frankness. “I do, yeah.”

“Well then let’s hope that our good friend the Emperor shows his royal arse sometime soon,” Tommy grumps, thumbing over the edge of the letter that will solidify his doom. “And perhaps we can all go back to bed.”

He can recognize an outstretched hand when he sees it. Samuel is offering him help, here, but it’s out of pity. He sees Tommy as lesser, doesn’t he? Compared to Dream, who sees him as capable in his own right. The Vaults had helped the Isles at one point during the war— secretly, of course. Under the table. Most of their armor, technology, and enchantment supplies came from the Vaults at one point or another. Just like how Libra aided the Empire more than once. But those hadn’t been alliances. They’d been business transactions. Tommy isn’t any good at those. Dream is.

“Oh?” One of the council members leans forward, resting her elbows on the table and tipping her pretty face to the right. “What do you mean by that, Your Highness?”

He does not miss the way they all look at him, and his not-so-innocent piece of parchment. This moment has been a long time coming. When Tommy had informed his advisors of the decision, their relief had been palpable. Even now they stand behind him, shoulders more relaxed than they’d been since they arrived. This is the final swing. The true end.

And then the doors fly open. In comes a rush of cooler air and voices, spilling over the threshold as the Emperor makes his way into the room. Like rushing water, Tommy is overwhelmed for a brief moment – drowning – then thrashes his way back to the surface.

“—that’s enough,” the emperor is saying sharply, General Technoblade is not a foot behind him. Outside, Prince Wilbur peers into the room and glowers in Tommy’s general direction specifically. It takes everything in Tommy’s power not to sneer right back. “I’ll see you in a bit, Wil.” Tommy knows that tone. He’s heard it more times than he can count, mostly from Dream. Wilbur is being dismissed. A flutter of something vindictive runs through him, a thrill. The door shuts and the prince disappears from view.

“Apologies,” the emperor says, seating himself at the head of the table. “Got carried away this morning. Right on. How’re we lookin’?”

All gazes in the room turn to Tommy. He purses his lips, as though he’s debating what he wants to say.

(In reality, Tommy knows what he is going to say. It has been scripted for this very moment. He is a performer and this is his stage and he is fulfilling the promise he made to Dream last night as he burned the letter. This is his retribution. The Isles will not suffer for it; if anything, they might become stronger. His heart is heavy with the weight of a thousand suns, but he knows it is for the best. So he puts on a mask and plays his part.)

Carefully, Tommy pushes forward the letter and stands, bracing his hands on the table. He lets his exhaustion show on his face. He lets his shoulders slump.

“With the power invested in me as king,” Tommy says, fighting to keep the shiver out of his voice. He fails. That, at least, is not fake. “I surrender. The Opus Isles officially will admit defeat. It will be unconditional. I have set terms in this document, which we have formerly discussed.” Tommy nods towards the letter, which Philza is slowly unfolding and scanning. Behind him, Technoblade is watching. His armor glitters, and his eyes are not on Philza or the letter. They’re on Tommy. Two burning fire-bright stars. “I’ve stalled long enough,” Tommy admits quietly, letting all his failed hopes flood into his voice. “I can’t any more. You’ve won.”

Silence is deafening.

“And you’re sure about this?” Philza asks, looking upwards from the paper to Tommy. “You’ve consulted?”

He sure has. Tommy nods. “I’m sure.”

“Hold on a second,” someone says, and both of their heads turn. It’s Samuel. “Thomas,” he says, raising a hand. “This is such a stark change. Are you sure you made this decision on your own?”

Tommy swallows, and then nods. “I thought it over last night,” he says. “I asked Prime for guidance. I knew it was a matter of eventuality but I didn’t—” he cuts himself off, grits his teeth. “I didn’t want to admit it. This is my decision.”

“It’s good to see you come to your senses,” Philza cuts in, reaching out with a hand to get Tommy’s attention. He’s smiling, cheeks pulled up and eyes crinkling as he sits there and

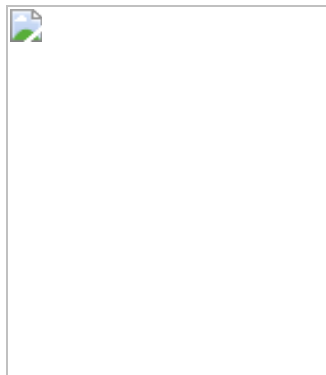
Tommy looks down upon him. He looks warm. Tommy wants to punch him so badly. “Thank you, Thomas.”

“There is no pleasure for me in this,” Tommy informs him. Then, in simpler terms: “It sucks.”

“I’m aware,” Philza says. He tips his head, retracting his hand from where he’d stretched it across the table. Tommy swallows, and then moves to sit. “We’ll proceed on this measure, then. Perhaps beginning with a treaty including all of us, as a declaration of surrender on the Isles’ part—” Philza’s voice fades a bit as Tommy sits, retreating back into his own head. The wooden chair is uncomfortable beneath him, the slats pressing into his back, but finally no one is looking at him. No one save Technoblade, who is in fact, watching Tommy very, very closely. But that’s normal— Tommy is used to the man’s unsettling stare by now. Tommy stares back for a moment, blue meeting red, and they have an internal battle over something. Tommy’s not sure what the man is thinking; the fur of his cloak rises above his head and lumps around his shoulders, giving him a wide, menacing look. But in the end, it is Technoblade who looks away, down to the back of Philza’s head. Tommy sighs. He sinks back into his seat now that he is unbothered, tucking his shaking hands into his armpits and staring at the fine grain of the table.

There. He’s done it.

Surrender.



## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

man, tommy. you held out for so long, good job you little rat<3 and yet, he fell. wonder what this implies for our good friend king thomas- oh, sorry. guess he's not king anymore :)

let me know your favorite characters in the comments and why ! i'm curious!!! make sure to leave a kudos too if you're enjoying the twists and turns of this story<3

(quick reminder that if you go to my ao3 profile you can actually..... PRIME SUB TO ME ON AO3!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! HIT THE SUBSCRIBE BUTTON AND GIVE IT A BIG WHACK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! WOOOOOOO AO3 PRIME !!!!!!!)

-

also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

## **arc III. - both haunted and holy**

### Chapter Summary

tw: passive suicidal thoughts

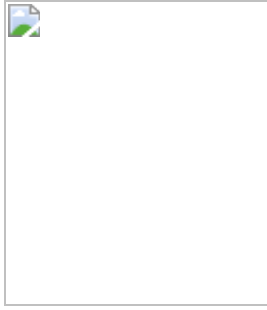
this chapter was beta'd by the lovely TJ/definitelynotshouting!!!! incredible feedback, super good friend :)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)







Once upon a time, two little boys stood on opposite sides of a ballroom.

This ball is not a normal affair– people of three kingdoms (the fourth conspicuously missing) have come to mingle, drink, and talk. People of three kingdoms, one of which has only just reentered society, have come to see one another and gape at the newcomers. Spirits are high, and as the first party in nearly half a decade, many are already two or three drinks in.

Two boys stand across the ballroom from each other, clinging onto their mother’s skirts, eyes wide as the dancers swing and the adults talk above them. A childish fog overcomes them– brown eyes scan the room with mischief, their two-toned brothers staring at the floor not a few meters away.

Soulmates on the continent have always been a touchy subject. Not all of the pantheons support it– not all of them believe. And yet, some think that certain paths cross at just the right moment, just the right time.

As such: a woman accidentally bumps into another, laughing with ruddy cheeks in apology. The other laughs in return, smiling and gripping her own drink to keep from spilling it.

Two boys are dragged from their own thoughts, and lock gazes.

“Mum,” says one of the boys, tugging at a length of silken skirt. “His eyes are two different colors.”

“Tubbo,” his mother scolds, leaning down and landing a warm hand on his hair. “Don’t be rude. Remember what I told you?”

“Don’t say anything unless it can be fixed in five minutes or less,” Tubbo recalls to himself, still staring at the other boy who has yet to open his mouth.

“He has heterochromia,” his mother says, not unkindly. She speaks in a way that is factual. The knowledge should be already known to the boy, who has barely reached his eighth year. She expects this of him.

“It’s fairly common in our people,” the other mother cuts in, smiling warmly, but there’s a layer of instability behind her eyes. Perhaps it’s fear. Perhaps she’s wondering if her son will be shamed because of this, if he will grow up in this frightening new world and be persecuted simply because of his birthright. There’s no sign of it on the horizon for those coming out of Libra, not yet– but the whispers are there. The foundations of hatred, prickly and sharp.

“Ranboo, say hello.”

“Hello,” the shy little boy says, still hiding behind his mother’s skirts.

“I like your het– her–” The first boy struggles for a moment.

“Heterochromia,” his mother says again, slower. “You can do it, love.”

“Het-er-oh-chrom-ia,” he sounds out gently. Then, reverently, “That’s so cool.”

“Ask your father to get you a book on genetics,” his mother says, glancing back up at the other woman. They lock gazes once more, and unnoticed to the two little boys beneath them, an understanding is made. Mother to mother, person to person.

“Mum,” says the first boy, the second still yet to say anything save his greeting. He tugs on her skirts once more, glancing up when she looks down. “Can we go play?”

“As long as you don’t get into too much trouble,” she says kindly, “I don’t see why not.”

“Of course,” says the other mother, prying the other boy’s hand off of her own. She insists again: “Go on, make a friend.”

Two-toned eyes meet brown, and fate sighs in relief. All is right.

“Hello,” says Tubbo, bounding a step forward. He ignores how the other flinches. “I’m Tubbo.”

So quietly that he may not have spoken, the second boy whispers: “I’m Ranboo.”

“Good job,” his mother says encouragingly, before turning her attention to Tubbo’s mother. “He’s just so shy,” she says, and above their heads, the conversation continues. Below the fog of society and people, Tubbo reaches out a hand and Ranboo nervously places his fingers in his, gripping tight.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Tubbo says, shaking his hand hard. Ranboo winces.

“You too,” he whispers.

“What?” Tubbo asks, leaning in. They do not let go of each other. “I can’t hear you! It’s too loud. Everyone’s talking. I hate it. I much prefer it back at home, where you can’t talk. At least not in the libraries. I’m allowed to shout in my house. Are you allowed to shout? You seem very quiet.”

“No,” Ranboo says, although it’s not really clear what he’s answering. Tubbo is already chattering again, swinging their combined hands with gusto. He does not plan to let go. As they talk, Tubbo scans the room.

“–and then I said ‘I can talk whenever I want!’ and oh he did not like that– oh, wait! Have you seen the snack table yet?”

Ranboo’s eyes turn up, following Tubbo’s line of sight. For a second, they sparkle.

“No,” he whispers again.

“Then let’s go,” Tubbo demands, pulling on his hand and dragging Ranboo across the room. Neither of their mothers stop them– in fact, at the end of the night, it’s nearly impossible to separate them. And the day after, and the day after that. By the end of the week, both boys are crying as they part, promising to write, parents laughing but a bit teary, too.

Fate hums. This is a friendship that will last.



Tommy finds a letter on his desk four days after the Isles officially announces their surrender.

He’s spent most of that time in a haze. The diplomats have all but forgotten him– party after party has been held in celebration of the final treaty, but in the end Tommy had gone to none of them. The mere thought of it had made him actually, physically ill– in fact, he’d been lying in bed for a better part of those four days. His sickness hadn’t been an actual disease, the doctor had said (a kindly man with dark skin and shock-bright white hair, a mask over his nose and mouth), but something more akin to mental unwellness. The stress had left him prone to any manner of ailment.

At least it’s not the Red Cough. Tommy’d rather be puking his lungs out than coughing up a storm and shut in quarantine for three weeks.

Regardless, he’d spent a good chunk of time in bed, ill. Headaches and fever, a fatigue so exhausting that even getting up is a chore. Only on the fourth day does he emerge from his sickden and bid farewell to the last of the Vaults delegation. Samuel is one of the first to leave, and he smiles brightly upon seeing Tommy standing in the doorway of the throne room as they bid goodbye. It’s an easy walk back to his room from there, as he’s much too tired to think about sad things like goodbyes.

He hadn’t even liked Sam much, if he’s being honest with himself (he’s not). Sam had been annoying and had pitied Tommy, and been dead set on helping him as much as he could in the treaty. Getting him as much leeway as possible. He still couldn’t save Tommy from his fate of being kept in the Empire’s capital like some kind of captured songbird.

Tommy’s *not* sad he’s gone. Not one bit.

However, there is a letter on his desk after he shuts the door to his room, and it fills his chest with an indescribable emotion. It was not there when he left, and it’s the only thing different. He circles it for a while, but there’s a seal on the backside and when he picks it up, it’s thick, scented paper. Not the scrap of parchment Dream had written to him on before.

So maybe it's not from his advisor-turned-brother-turned-something. His name is written across the front, so it's clearly for him.

Tommy tears it open.

The handwriting is atrocious. Whoever wrote this has worse hand-eye skills than Tommy himself, even, and that's saying something. Tommy's had a whole lifetime of unscrambling messy papers, though, and he easily starts to parse the message out of the rambling.

He has his suspicions, and when he flips the papers over and finds the name scrawled at the bottom, he's proven right.

*Tubbo Underscore.*

The kid from the party about a week ago now. The one with the Talking Box, that Tommy had abruptly left in order to chase down Dream. Tommy hadn't known he was an Underscore. He should've figured it out, though— the Underscores were practically royalty in the Vaults. A family of geniuses, reknowned for their contributions to magical and non magical engineering. Someone Tubbo's age was bound to be from the Underscore lineage—he couldn't have been more than two years older than Tommy, and yet he'd already overthrown his mentor and served on a committee. And he's been smart, too, from what Tommy can recall of his speech about talking boxes and redstone. The letter is long and rambling, but there is personality written in between each sentence that floods out and drips onto Tommy's fingers. Tubbo calls him boss man and doesn't hold back from expletives, colloquial speech taking root instead of anything formal. At the end of the letter (most of which is talking about the ride back to the Vaults, the invention he's working on, and a new mining system Tubbo wants to try) is a shorter paragraph. Care has been put into this one—it's more legible than any of the others.

*Don't take this as an insult* , Tubbo writes, ink smudging a little bit. *But when we spoke on the balcony, you seemed lonely. I'm not sure if you've ever had a friend before, so I'd like to be your first.*

Tommy has friends. He had Dream. No, he *has* Dream, even if Dream is hiding in the city somewhere and not able to see him right now. Dream is his friend— so is Sapnap, and George. Tubbo would not be Tommy's first friend.

But the idea is somewhat tempting. And while Tommy feels like he should be insulted, he's strangely... not. Tubbo had written to him pages upon pages of absolutely nothing Tommy cares about, and yet he'd read them all and soaked up every word like a sponge.

*Write back*, Tubbo requests. There's a smiley face next to the sentence. While Tubbo will be traveling home for the next few days, all Tommy has to do is write a return letter and hand it off for it to find Tubbo. Or, for the messenger to find Tubbo.

There's a P.S. at the bottom. The handwriting changes here, to something loopy and scrawling. Tommy squints at it.

*Hi*, the handwriting says, *it's Ranboo. From the council.*

Eugh.

*I wanted to be included, he says. Tubbo and I are good friends. His judgement is strange at times, but I think you were nice enough. I would also like to be your friend. If you want. If not, that's fine too. Hope you're okay.*

Ranboo signs his name in long strokes, a star symbol pressed into the corner by his harried addition to the letter. Libra's symbol. It's not an official council letter, but it's from one of the council members and that's good enough to be official.

Tommy turns the papers over in his hands and thinks. An Underscore and a council member. Two potentially powerful allies asking for Tommy to be their friend. He's not sure exactly what friendship entails; do you just write letters back and forth? Would they come to visit? Would he get to go visit them? What do friends even talk about? According to Tubbo, friends talk about projects and fun bugs they saw on the road home and how Ranboo gets carriage-sick. Tommy doesn't really have any stories like that. He sits down to write a letter back anyways.

It takes five separate sheets of paper to get it right. His letter is less than a fifth the length of Tubbo's, and he can't shake the formality from his writing style. But he gets it out and he says *yes, I'll be your friend, send any further correspondence to the Empire's stronghold in Raven's Flight*, and then he seals it up in an envelope and puts it on his desk, and stares at it. Then he gets up, and with the letter in hand, marches out of his room. The guards startle (he's got two of them constantly outside his room, poor things. They must be so bored) and immediately start to follow him, but all he does is turn on his heel and stare them down.

"Where would Emperor Philza be right now?" he demands, waving the envelope in the air. The guards exchange looks, then one opens his mouth.

"Uh," he says. "His... study?"

"Take me there," Tommy instructs them. "Now."

And so they go forth, traversing the labyrinth-like halls of the palace. Tommy is solidly in the middle of his two-man entourage, but he doesn't even complain. He's just made two new friends. How can he be complaining about anything? He's on top of the fucking world! They arrive at the door of Philza's study before long and while the guards hesitate, Tommy does not. He knocks on the great wooden panels and pushes them open without waiting.

Philza is, at least, there. Sitting at his desk. So is Technoblade, who is sitting *on* the desk and pointing at a map.

General Technoblade is not wearing armor. Tommy stops in his tracks as both their gazes snap up to him. Only Philza relaxes.

"Tommy," he says. Tommy's shoulders bristle. "It's nice to see you up. What are you doing?"

For a second, he has nothing to say. General Technoblade is without his armor, and Tommy is struck by how imposing he looks even without it. A fine white shirt, buttoned up to his neck and down his arms, trousers up to his waist and a blue sash around his middle. A half-cloak is situated around his shoulder, a chrysanthemum barely visible on the back of it. His hair is down but braided, an emerald pin stuck neatly into the strands to help pin it up. It's glistening, surrounded by darkened silver, and strikingly similar to the brooch Tommy had thrown off the balcony. The jewel disappears as Technoblade turns his head to look at him. Behind the desk, Philza is also in the most casual attire Tommy's ever seen him in. A short tunic, fur and wool in bulky shapes. In a strange moment of astuteness, Tommy's eyes catch on the emerald earring hanging from the emperor's ear.

Ah.

They both look comfortable, the room well-lived in. There's a portrait above the hearth of Philza and his family, books lining the shelves, and incense burning on the mantle. Tommy feels incredibly out of place.

He doesn't let it deter him. "I want this sent," he says, stalking forward to put the letter on Philza's desk. The two men look at each other, and then Philza reaches out and examines the envelope with careful hands. "As soon as possible," Tommy adds gruffly.

"Tubbo Underscore," Philza reads aloud, looking up at him. "Is this anything to do with the letter delivered to you today?"

"Maybe," Tommy says. "Send it."

"Is it something I should be concerned about?" Philza asks. Tommy shakes his head.

"No," he says truthfully, because he has no reason to lie. "We met at the party I attended. He left, but apparently thought I was nice."

"So something's clearly wrong with him," Technoblade says, swinging a foot. Tommy glares up at him. "What?"

"Fuck off," Tommy says, looking back towards Phil, who is studying Tommy with a tired, curious look. His eyes are hooded, face drooped, but there's a glint to his gaze like the sun when it reflects off of snow. "Send it."

"I will," Philza nods, placing the letter back down on the desk. "Now, if that's all, Thomas, I need to continue speaking with Techno."

Tommy tips his head forward. "About what?" He asks, trying to get a look at the papers on his desk. Technoblade slips off his perch after a moment, holding an arm out and gently bumping his forearm into Tommy's shoulders.

"Nothing concerning you," he says firmly. Tommy glowers, and then attempts to duck under his arm. It doesn't work— Technoblade simply moves with him. Tommy scowls harder, the warm press of the older man's arm weighing heavily on his chest. Without the armor,

Technoblade is warm. No more cool touch of metal, no— instead the rustle of cloth. The short, intricate cape slung over the man's shoulder ripples as he moves.

"Everything concerns me, as of late," Tommy declares. "I'm the most important person in this place."

"Good to know your ego hasn't suffered much," Technoblade drawls, and Philza chokes out a laugh that is quickly stifled into his palm. Tommy glares, then raises his head and sniffs.

"You're a bunch of wronguns," he informs them both. "Pressuring me into surrendering, kidnapping me. Hurting my people."

"Your people will be fine." Philza is smiling, a gentle thing that crinkles the corners of his eyes. He looks happy. He looks well. The stress of the last few weeks has melted off his shoulders like glacier ice in spring, receding up the mountains and letting the flowers grow. Philza is smiling and Tommy feels vaguely ill once more. "You know the terms of the peace treaty, you helped write it. We are taking good care of them, I promise you that."

"I wouldn't trust your promises as far as I could throw you," Tommy points out. "You've lied to me before."

"I don't think I have," Philza says, leaning back in his seat and looking down at his desk, contemplating.

"You have," Tommy insists, although, now that he's thinking about it, maybe he's wrong. Maybe Philza is right— he cannot clearly recall any time the emperor has outright lied to him. But he shoves away any doubt into the back of his mind.

"Wilbur is in the drawing room," Philza says, changing the subject quite abruptly. Tommy opens his mouth to argue, to bring them back to the point and discuss the *lies*, but then he continues, "Kristin as well. She'd like to see you're feeling better. Techno, will you escort him across the hall?"

"Of course." Technoblade's arm crosses over Tommy's chest, a hand gently gripping his shoulder. "Come on, pup."

"Wait," Tommy says. "Hold on."

"I'll send your letter," Philza says, still smiling. It's clearly a dismissal. "You have nothing to worry about."

As Technoblade leads him out of the emperor's study, Tommy can't help but feel like he's been lied to once more.

Across the hall is the drawing room. Tommy's only been in here once or twice before, the most vivid memory being his first night here. This is where he'd stood, muddying the carpet with his traveling boots and still in the green and gold finery of his kingdom. His hair had

been darkened by dirt, dried blood still under his fingernails. He'd been desperate and lost, angry and confused. Not much has changed.

There's a warm fire in the fireplace, lanterns lighting the room as the curtains remain closed. Technoblade opens the door for him, hand still guiding him by the shoulder as they step inside.

"Hullo," Wilbur says from his spot on one of the lounges. He's sprawled carelessly across the cushions, glasses low on his nose, hair over his eyes, a book in hand. Kristin is opposite him, a long dress spread out across her own couch, fingers deftly weaving in and out of a garment as she stitches patterns into the cloth. They both look up as the door opens and the two step inside.

"I have a package," Technoblade says, and Kristin immediately coos.

"Tommy," she says with a grin, putting down her stitching in favor of holding a hand out and gesturing for him to come over. "Look at you, out of bed."

He steps over her way despite a curl of irritation making itself known in his gut. He's not a pet or a small child—the way they look at him makes him want to shrivel up on the floor and die.

"I wasn't expecting anything," Wilbur says primly, hardly looking up from the pages held out in front of him. "And certainly not something as large and annoying as this."

"Die," Tommy says, standing on the carpet between the couches; Kristin to his front and Wilbur behind him. He glares over his shoulder at the older teen, who merely flips a page and puffs out his cheeks slightly.

"You've got him?" The general asks, directing the question towards the empress without so much as another word to either Tommy or Wilbur. She nods, and Tommy's hand slips into her outstretched one gently as she holds him there, frozen in place. He's not scared—just compliant. For some reason (may it be a longing for some kind of acceptance?) he's more inclined to listen to Kristin. She, at least, is kind.

"I have," she assures Technoblade, squeezing Tommy's fingers in her own. "We'll take supper in here, I think."

"I'll let the ladies know," the general says, ducking his head. He leaves the room, the door shutting with a decisive bang that has Tommy's shoulders tense and his stomach in a knot. The empress' hand is firm around his, and she gently tugs his fingers after a moment to draw his attention back to her.

"Come here," she says, leaning up slightly in her seat. Tommy frowns—she raises a hand, and he automatically steps back and flinches. Kristin pauses, her hand lax and open in the air, hovering. For a moment her face twists, and Tommy drags his hand from hers, ducking away to stare into the fire instead. "Tommy," she says, impossibly gentle, and Tommy wants nothing more than to lean back into her, maybe curl up against her side, but he is not allowed to. "I was just going to feel your forehead for fever."



“I’m fine,” he says, tucking his arms neatly across his chest. “The doctor said so.”

In his peripheral, the empress’ hand falls. She gives him a smile, tight-lipped and thin. “If you insist,” she says gently. Her hands once again find her stitching and slowly, she begins to work on it once more. “Amuse yourself, darling. There are books and puzzles, or I could teach you to embroider, if you like.”

“Mm,” Tommy hums, a non-answer. He doesn’t try to give her anything, really, instead focusing on the fire. Behind him, Kristin sighs, deep and heavy.

He ignores it. He chooses to study the drawing room instead, feet carrying him from wall to wall. He drags his hands over the cool smooth stone, letting his nails catch in the miniscule divots, and scuffs his feet against the floor. The far wall is covered in bookshelves, and he tips a few out to stare at the covers. None of them particularly catch his eye, so back to the stacks they go.

Books. He has to go back to the library at some point– he needs to see if Karl can send a letter back to Dream. He has to write a letter back to Dream. Surely the man has already heard of Tommy’s surrender, with how the city has been partying. And he still has to return the star chart. Prime, he *needs* to do that. Tonight he’ll draft, and tomorrow he’ll send it off.

Tommy turns from the bookshelves and instead, a different cover catches his eye. It’s the one that the prince is holding. Something to do, he muses, until they get tired of him and chop his head off now that there’s no proper use for him anymore.

“What are you reading?” he asks, draping himself over the back of the lounge, legs kicking up into the air. The prince heaves a sigh, letting the book fall into his lap with a hand in the pages.

“Nothing you’d like,” he says. “Piss off.”

“The title says it’s fairytales,” Tommy points out, reaching a hand over the prince’s shoulder and poking the book with the very tip of his index finger. “Are you reading children’s stories?”

“Every fictional tale is inspired by another,” the prince says, and Tommy notes how his cheeks are just the very slightest bit red in embarrassment. Good, he thinks. Let him be embarrassed. Someone other than me deserves to feel a bit of unease.

“But this is the pure stuff,” Tommy points out. “Tales meant for kids.”

“Would you like to hear one, then?” The prince asks, turning his head to glare at Tommy.

“No,” he says primly. “The book’s in Northal, which means it’s all your stories and none of mine.” He knows a few of the core Northern folk tales anyways, from scrolls in his own library back south. He much prefers the short, cautionary tales of his homeland instead of the prose-heavy spiderweb-spun anecdotes originating from the Empire’s land. They’d all been so dry and dense. Tommy had barely gotten through one without help.

“They might be more similar than you think,” the prince offers. He holds the book up once more. “Either leave me alone or read over my shoulder, you entitled piece of goose shit.” Tommy is somewhat surprised by the invitation, but ends up pulling away instead. Leaning backwards, slipping off the couch, and crouching down behind it. Slipping, sliding, melting his way onto the cool floor and picking absently at the edges of the soft carpet. It’s a rich maroon color, threads of silver woven side-by-side in an intricate floral pattern. Tommy splays out against the floor, tipping his head just so to follow the pattern and watch as it all comes together. Ah. Chrysanthemum, again.

“Don’t you get tired of all the flowers?” he asks abruptly. Prince Wilbur’s head appears over the back of the couch, blinking at Tommy where he lies on the floor.

“What?” he asks. Tommy gestures at the rug.

“Flowers,” he says. “The ‘mums.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a king?” Wilbur asks him. “Get off the damn floor.”

“You’re right. I’m king, which means I’ll do what I please,” Tommy easily counters, rolling over onto his back and staring at the ceiling— which is, for some reason, slightly reflective. He tips his head, staring at the warped and shiny other version of himself, which tips its head in return. The ceiling must be made of some sort of metal, based on how the decorations are stamped into it and send his limbs into all different corners of the design.

“You’re a child,” Wilbur says, disappearing back over the couch. Tommy shrugs.

“So’re you.”

“I’m an adult,” Wilbur says, sounding slightly affronted. Tommy can’t see him from here, but he sure can picture the look on his face.

“That’s not what Emperor Philza seems to think,” Tommy taunts in a sing-song voice. “He seems keen on keeping you in the background.” The room goes quiet. Too quiet. There’s no ambient noise of Wilbur flipping pages, or Kristin’s occasional hum. No shift of fabric. Just silence.

Tommy has the subtle idea that, perhaps, he’s fucked up.

Prince Wilbur stands from the couch and turns, just as Tommy scrambles up onto his elbows. They’re locked into a staring contest for all of five seconds before Wilbur is launching himself at the younger boy, fury written plain as day over his face.

“Wilbur!” Kristin’s voice is background noise as Tommy immediately turns on his heels, scrabbling for purchase on the boundary between rug and hardwood, catapulting himself across the room. Pure terror courses through his veins as he shoves himself under the table on the other end of the room, sending chairs flying backwards and a candelabra on top crashing to the side. Kristin is shouting; Wilbur is deadly silent, and that is even scarier. The door opens, and more shouts echo in the room.

“You impudent little brat,” Wilbur hisses between gritted teeth, and Tommy crawls under the table and out the other side. “You fucking *insignificant* cretin.”

The bookshelves are firm under his back, and he is cornered, and Wilbur is still fucking following him, and Tommy is still on the fucking floor. Powerless, truly, and hey— maybe they’ll kill him finally and just wash their hands of the whole affair. For a second he’s not in the Empire— he’s home, staring down a hand similar to the one currently reaching for his hair and aiming to pull and direct and give orders.

Tommy’s insisted he’s not an animal, up to this point. Refuted the nickname given to him by the general, shouted and screamed and proven he’s raw in his humanity. Achingly, terrifyingly human. He wants to be human. He doesn’t want to be anyone’s show pony or pet. At home, he’d been respected and talked to, at least. He’d made the decisions, or had a say in them. He’d been Dream’s friend, his brother, his family. They’d had each other and that had been good, even when it wasn’t.

All they do in the Empire is treat him like a prize. A bird, captured and caged.

So Tommy does what all cornered animals do: he bites.

Wilbur’s skin is soft and warm under his teeth. There is iron on his tongue and a screech coming from Wilbur that sounds inhuman. He shakes his arm like maybe it’ll dislodge Tommy, but he refuses to let go. Dream had always said he was stubborn— he’s proven the older man’s point over and over in recent days. Only once the taste of iron on his tongue (thick, bitter, metallic) becomes too great for him to handle does he let go, prying his teeth off the thin webbing of flesh between Wilbur’s left pointer finger and thumb. He’s left a considerable mark and he grins, baring his teeth as floating hands grasp his shoulders and forearms and haul him to his feet.

“He fucking bit me!” Wilbur is shouting, cradling his hand to his chest and scowling in Tommy’s general direction. Kristin is just over his shoulder, a mixture of concern and surprise painting her face as she reaches out and puts a hand on Wilbur’s shoulder, guiding him away. Tommy’s sight is the tiniest bit blurry in his panic, and as the guards shuffle him towards the door, it only becomes more and more crowded. The shouting at least, has stopped, but the voices all flow over his head. He can’t stop staring at Wilbur, at the red leaching out from under his fingers, the way his nose is curled up in disgust. They stare at one another, angry, Tommy’s chest heaving and the taste of blood still lingering on his lips.



Tommy’s used to being in trouble.

He's used to the cold seat of scrutiny. More than once he's been scolded or punished for doing any number of things wrong— Tommy's made sure his list of imperfections ranges from sneaking out at night to spitting in a noble's face (that had not been a good day). He's used to doing bad things and getting reamed out for them. It's a part of life. He's not even particularly worried about his transgression this time around— Wilbur is sitting in one of the chairs across from him, hand completely smoothed over and healed. A simple potion had dealt with it, and so Tommy's not really worried. What he is worried about, however, is the glare still evident on the prince's face. And the annoyed one on Technoblade's. And the frighteningly calm one on Emperor Philza's.

"He bit me," the prince says, exactly the same as he'd been screeching earlier when he'd still been bleeding. Tommy can still taste his blood and the salt of his skin. The prince is sitting in a chair opposite Tommy in the emperor's office, hands in his lap and leaning back against the cushions. Tommy, on the other hand, is sat upright— rigid, but not fearful. Just attentive. He's paying attention, he is. He swears he is. His mind just keeps getting caught up on the thoughts of *when will they end this?* or *man, my mouth feels gross right now*. "Little brat made a rude fucking comment and then bolted, and bit when I got too close. Like a rat."

Tommy bites back the urge to say *you deserved it* and focuses his gaze on the window behind Philza. It's big, frost painting the edges as the sun begins to kiss the edge of the horizon. Deep, long shadows are cast upon the valley, Philza's room facing the city proper and beyond that, the meadows. Tommy watches as the shadow cast by the valley cliffs crawl towards the city and sighs quietly.

"Is this boring you?" Wilbur snaps suddenly, and Tommy blinks back to attention at once. The prince is leaning forward, towards him again, but not getting up to chase this time. Good. Tommy had hated that. He's angry, really, truly angry. The kind of visceral rage that clogs your throat and makes your head fuzzy and makes you lash out. Dream had often told him what it was like to be angry, bringing out a dictionary after a rough day and pointing out words that described it.

Anger is so much more than just being mad, he had said. It's grief. It's fear. It's unspoken in the way a person moves. An angry person can be read like a book— you can tell just what made them upset. Maybe their coffee was burnt this morning, or maybe a book they read hadn't ended the way they'd wanted it to. Maybe their dog is dead, and they hate the world for it. Maybe an annoying little king is causing issues for someone just trying to help. According to Dream, you can tell if they're going to do something about it, too.

Wilbur doesn't look like he's going to do anything about it, at least. As Tommy stares at him, the set of his shoulders, he knows that here in front of the emperor he is safe from the prince.

But he's not safe from the General, who's hand is still heavy on the back of his neck. Holding him in place, as though Tommy has anywhere to run to.

"Thomas," the general says. "Are you going to say anything?"

He'd been mostly silent as the four of them had duked it out— the empress is across the room now, standing behind her husband with her arms crossed and back to them, staring out the window. They'd argued, very briefly, in hushed tones that Tommy couldn't make out. He

gnaws on his lip for a second— Dream had always liked it when he stayed quiet after fucking up— but there's no one here to vouch for him, it seems.

“He was going to hit me,” Tommy says simply. The prince balks.

“I was not,” he says, leaning back in his chair slightly. “Well. I was— I wasn't going to.”

“I said something mean,” Tommy explains, because he can at least admit it was mean, “and Prince Pussyface took it like a champ, of course, and by that I mean he vaulted over the back of the couch and tried to kill me.”

“I did not!” Wilbur throws his hands in the air, turning to his father. “See what I mean? About the immaturity? You've been too lenient. I would never—”

“Wilbur.” Philza is stern as he says the prince's name, and it shuts them both up. Tommy snaps his jaw closed with a click, and Wilbur is so red there might as well be smoke pouring out of his ears. “Prime, would both of you...” He trails off, leaning forward and cradling his head in one hand, elbow planted firmly on his desk. For a moment, the emperor shuts his eyes and breathes. Tommy watches.

“Philza,” Technoblade says evenly. “Cormorant?”

“I can't send them out there now,” Philza says, slightly muffled into the palm of his hand. “The ocean is too rough this time of year, and the weather too cold. We'd have to wait until spring.”

“But what about the tour?” Kristin turns finally, her face curtained by dark locks of hair. It's down today, curling around her shoulders and shining evenly in the sunlight. “We'll be in Libra come the spring equinox.”

“We'll what?” Tommy asks, glancing between Wilbur and the emperor and then Kristin.

“Kris,” Philza warns. “Please.”

“Maybe not you, darling,” Kristin soothes in Tommy's direction, making her way over to Philza's side and planting a hand on the desk. The other rests on the emperor's back, and Tommy resists the urge to make a face. Eugh, married people. Her eyes are still on Tommy, though. “Cormorant is lovely. Wil and I go to the island almost every summer.”

“So, that's it, then,” Tommy says, blinking carefully. Philza lifts his head to look, and Wilbur's face twists on the edge of his vision. “You've gotten what you wanted from me and now I'm being sent away.”

“Would you rather be dead?” Technoblade asks, voice low.

“Honestly? Yes.” Tommy says in return, twisting his head to look up at the older man. Who—who almost looks startled at his confession. The room is quiet, and when Tommy looks back at Philza, he is stone faced and silent. Wilbur is quiet. Kristin even more so. Gently, as not to arouse any alarm in them, Tommy shrugs off Technoblade's hand and moves to stand. He

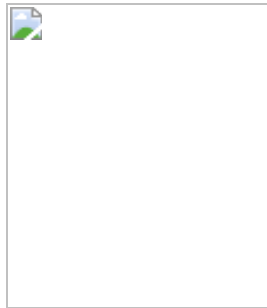
turns to Wilbur, clasping his hands behind his back and nodding his head gently in his direction.

“I apologize for biting you,” he says. “You kind of deserved it. Regardless, I’ll make it my absolute best effort not to do it again. I can do better.” The apology spills from his mouth effortlessly. He’s practiced sounding sincere. He turns, finding Philza still staring. “My headache is coming back. May I go?”

He wants nothing more than to curl up in a tiny ball under his sheets and sleep the rest of the days away. Without a word, Philza nods. Blessed, lovely relief. He hadn’t lied about his headache returning– it might not have ever left, actually. The pulsing pain starts behind his eyes and travels up his temples, making him exhausted and irritable all at once. Perhaps he’s caught whatever disease makes the prince such an annoying prick to be around.

Quietly, he turns to go. Technoblade doesn’t even trail him out the doors, which is a surprise in itself. He doesn’t stop outside the door to antagonize his guards, either– he just walks, their presence ever-felt behind him. He knows the way from Philza’s office to the Yellow Room (or his room) by now, and it’s not hard to heave open the doors and throw himself inside.

The bed is cool against his fevered forehead, and Tommy presses his face into the pillows until he can’t breathe.

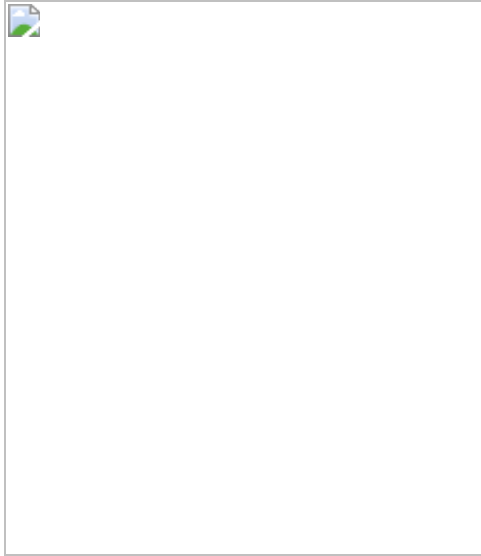


*I did what you told me to.*

*I hate it here. I hate it here so much. I miss you. Please, come get me soon, or talk to me, or something. No word for a week, and I think I’m already going insane. They all hate me here, and believe me, I hate them in return. There’s nothing to do, either. It’s boring and I don’t fit in and every tiny fight turns into something huge.*

*Sorry. I’m complaining. I know– I’ll do better. I shouldn’t pick fights, that’s what you’d tell me. So I won’t any more. I’ll stay quiet and keep my head down. Sorry.*

*Please come soon. Or write. Anything.*



## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

yikes, that's a heavy note to leave off on

anyways- i promise it's gonna get a little better, then a little worse, then better, then worse- it'll be fine at some point I SWEAR !!!!!!!!!!!!!!! poor tommy man i keep puttin him through the wringer. wonder how much longer he can keep holding on :) also beeduo! i love them in this au sm. their wedding (/p and which happens eventually) is the most chaotic thing the continent's ever seen pretty much. they r just special to me :)

(quick reminder that if you go to my ao3 profile you can actually..... PRIME SUB TO ME ON AO3!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! HIT THE SUBSCRIBE BUTTON AND GIVE IT A BIG WHACK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! WOOWOOOOO AO3 PRIME !!!!!!!)

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also maybe follow me on [twitter](#) where you can come and say hi!!!!!! as well as a [tumblr](#)! ask me questions and shit i love to know what you're thinking!

or, consider joining the [discord](#)!

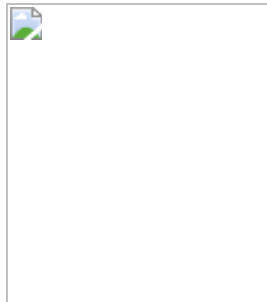
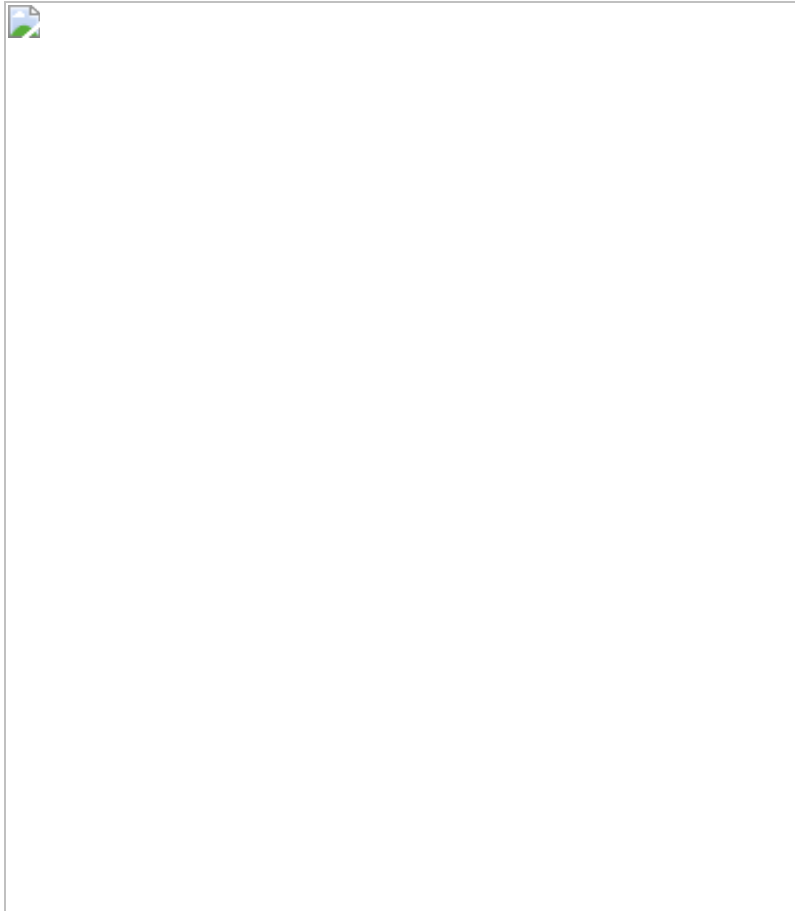
# arc III. - keep fixing what you know is only bound to break

## Chapter Summary

twos: religious imagery

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Winter comes.



It drags its feet upon arrival. Like a petulant child or wronged lover, winter comes and with it the nights grow longer and the days shorter. Tommy is starting to notice how the sun is less and less visible this far north, and how the days drop in temperature until he's forced to wear a cloak inside. Everyone does— the clothing of the Empire is thick and woolen and layered. More often than not Tommy finds himself shivering, piling on three different shirts in order to keep somewhat warm.

Things have been strangely quiet since his outburst with Wilbur and the following conversation in Philza's study. No one has pestered Tommy to come out for dinners or anything— they've let him sleep, curled up the whole day in bed. He's been hungry, too. Ridiculously hungry, to the point of inhaling everything brought to his room. Even when it looks unappealing he finds himself trying it anyways, and more often than not finishing the dish. The beginning of winter has made him lethargic and ravenous and temperamental— he snaps one day at a poor lady-in-waiting who had just come to stoke the fire, and then immediately apologizes over and over to her despite her assurances she did not blame him.

His Majesty's Royal Physician says it's a mixture of the new climate and stress. Tommy likes Ponk. He's the only person to get Tommy to laugh in ages (it had been a terrible pun about lemons). That, and the letters that arrive like clockwork from one Tubbo Underscore.

One every three days. Tommy feels bad for the poor messengers, but every time he gets a new one he lights up like the city center on the solstice. Tubbo is funny and witty and ridiculously smart, refuting every one of Tommy's miserable points with either a joke or a statistic. Ranboo peppers his writing in with Tubbo's as well, and Tommy begrudgingly has to admit that the other boy is... okay. Not as great as Tubbo, but okay.

He writes back as soon as he gets the letters, and sooner than later he has a box full of a notebook's worth of paper just from the two other boys. His own letters stretch on to five pages or longer.

Nothing from Dream, though.

He's been waiting. Expectant, since he'd hobbled his way down to the library and handed over the star scroll to Karl with a meaningful look. It had been easier this time without Technoblade hovering over his shoulder, and he had asked Karl to let him know when a new addition was made to the chart (the message inside his request had been clear— come to me when you get something new from Dream). But after his last correspondence, the man has been silent. It worries him more than he lets on.

*Are you just going to sit there and mope?* Dream asks him, or, the version of Dream that sits in the back of his mind at all times. *Or get your head in the game and play?*

I think I'd rather mope, Tommy tells the imaginary version of Dream, staring out the window blearily as the sun rises. He can't remember sleeping last night, although he must've.

Prime, apparently, has other plans.

The doors to his bedroom open, creaking unceremoniously. Tommy stays lying in bed— it's probably a maid coming to relight the hearth, or someone with food, although whoever it is,

they linger by the door and creak it back and forth for a while. After a second or two of it, Tommy picks his head up from his pillows and glares.

Prince Wilbur is standing in his doorway, frowning as he wobbles the door on it's hinges.

"We need to have that oiled," he says, and a curl of anger rises in Tommy's stomach. So much for being left alone today. The day is already ruined. Wilbur turns away from the door finally, shutting it with a soft snap, and raises his chin at Tommy. "You look like shit. Get up."

"No," Tommy says, watching with narrowed eyes as the other boy makes his way over the window, throwing the curtains open a bit wider. He groans, and buries his head into the sheets once more. "Go away."

"Nope," Wilbur says, and there's the ambient noise of his room waking up. Wilbur is pitifully trying to relight the hearth when Tommy picks his head up next. It's not working, and he snickers a bit as the prince pokes and prods at the charcoal remains of last night's flames. "Shut up. Get dressed. You haven't left this room in a week and a half."

"So?" Tommy curls up further under his comforter, smoothing his hands down the top of it. He likes this blanket. It's big, with feather down stuffing it and soft little pearl buttons quilting the center of it. And the best part is that it's not even blue— it's a soft yellow, to match the rest of the room. "I like it in here. I'm making it easy for you lot anyways, willingly staying in my prison cell."

"This is a bedroom, not a cell," Wilbur says, giving up on his endeavors with the fireplace in order to stand up and turn around. He brushes his hands against the cloth of his pants, and Tommy petulantly sticks his tongue out at him. "Come on, Thomas. Tommy."

"I'll bite you again," Tommy warns, and Wilbur seems to take the threat to heart, keeping his distance as he skirts the edge of the room.

"I want to apologize," he says abruptly, and Tommy watches him with a careful, uncertain gaze.

"For?" Tommy prompts.

"For the incident," Wilbur says, forcing the words through his teeth as though it pains him. "I shouldn't have let it get to me, and I apologize for scaring you."

"You didn't scare me," Tommy snaps, shrinking back into the pillows as Wilbur's eyes widen behind his glasses, then settle once more. He forces himself to sit up straighter, taking a breath and letting it out slowly. "You still don't scare me. I'm *not* sorry I bit you. I lied to get out of trouble. You deserved it."

"Right." Wilbur nods briefly. "Well, if you're not scared of me, then you'll get up and come with me."

"I already said no," Tommy says, turning his nose up at the idea. Literally. He stares down at Wilbur and scowls deeply. "Fuck off."

"You're moping," Wilbur informs him, stalking forward until he's at the side of the bed. Tommy refuses to shrink back again and instead, tips his head to glare at him. "It's the season for it, plus everything else. Winter brings bad moods. Folks in the mountains call it the dark sleep. There's ways to stave it off."

"Well, in the south we call it being a little pussy," Tommy bites back. "Go away so I can keep moping."

"No," Wilbur says. "I want to help you."

"And now *you're* lying," Tommy points out. "Fuck off."

"Fine," Wilbur says. "I am lying. I don't want to help you. But I do feel bad."

"I don't want your pity or your guilt," Tommy raises his chin. "So go."

"If you won't come outside this room, then I'll just stay here," Wilbur reasons. "There's no escaping me, sunshine."

"I said fuck off," Tommy hisses, drawing back into his pile of blankets once more. "And don't call me that." It's almost as bad as pup, slimy and possessive. Something about it makes his hackles rise.

"I'll call you what I please..." Wilbur pauses. "Little bird?"

"I will bite you," Tommy threatens. Wilbur throws a hand out, the same one Tommy had bit the other day.

"Feel free," he says. "If I let you get some of that anger out, will you come with me for a walk?"

Tommy considers it. For a brief moment, he eyes Wilbur's hand. But the fact of the matter is, biting someone is not as pleasant as what people might think, and he has no idea where Wilbur's hands have been, either. He shakes his head. Wilbur sighs.

"Fine," he says. "You've made me pull my trap card." Tommy scowls deeply, leaning back into the pillows as Wilbur pulls his hand back and rummages in his pocket. He pulls something out with his hand clenched in a fist, and Tommy finds himself leaning forward just to get a glimpse.

It's taffy. Saltwater, to be precise. Tommy recognizes the bright packaging. It's from the Isles— from a specific company that Tommy actually knows. One in Caterwaul, with it's great big factory and candy sold on nearly every shop shelf. It's a tiny piece of home, and Wilbur offers it to him with a smile. He hesitates, eyeing him, and then reaches out to take it—

And Wilbur pulls his hand away, just out of Tommy's reach. "Ah," he says. "Get out of bed, and we'll talk."

It's a bribe. He is being bribed. But Tommy hasn't had proper food from home in ages, and taffy has always been special. Not his favorite, but special. And it's *home*. Even the packaging makes him feel slightly better, just looking at the bright yellow and pink parcel. He wants to unwrap the sweet and savor it as long as he can, tuck the wax-coated paper into his pocket and keep it forever.

Slowly, Tommy pushes the blankets off his feet and scooches to the edge of the bed. Wilbur watches with devious eyes as Tommy's feet hit the floor. It's cold, and he drags his toes back up after a second, curling them back towards his legs.

"All the way out," Wilbur says, taking a step or two backwards as Tommy emerges from his cocoon. It's a strange sort of rebirth, and he puts his feet on the cold floor once more and stands up. Wilbur smiles, and then holds his hand out again. Tommy takes the taffy without a second glance, darting one hand out to grab the treat and tuck it close to his chest once he's got it in his grasp. He stares down at the color, the wax thick and soft under his fingertips, and he doesn't hesitate to pull on the ends and unwrap. The candy goes right into his mouth—it's salty, sweet, maybe watermelon or passion fruit. He runs the packaging through his fingers three or four times before it's gone. When he looks up next, Wilbur is holding out a shirt.

"Get dressed," he says. Tommy considers turning right back around and crawling into bed.

And then Wilbur pulls another piece of candy out of his pocket.

One piece of taffy per article of clothing is what they agree on. Wilbur's supply is seemingly endless, a colorful parade of sweetness pouring from his pockets as Tommy slowly drags himself back to life. He gets one for washing his face, for letting Wilbur tug a brush through his hair, for putting on his boots by himself.

And then Wilbur nods to the door.

"Come on," he says. "Let's go."

Tommy's amassed a good few wrappers in his pockets already. His mouth feels weird from the sugar, but he's not about to let himself be dragged out on a walk without some sort of reward. No sir. He's better than that—he'll milk the shit out of Wilbur's guilt.

"What do I get for it?" He asks, eyeing him carefully. Wilbur sighs.

"I'll give you the rest of the box," he says, and Tommy thinks he must be referring to the candy. "Plus, you'll like where we're going."

Tommy follows as Wilbur dips outside the door. The hallway is open and bright, lanterns lining the walls as they begin to make their way to the left, and down. Tommy's been this way once or twice, but the past few days have made his memory a bit cloudy. He's been having a hard time remembering things, he's noticed—events of the past few weeks are fuzzy, with some exceptions. He drags his feet as they go, but Wilbur is strangely patient with him as they walk, keeping pace and not going far ahead if at all. Tommy runs the remnants of the

last piece of taffy over his tongue, pulling the last bit of sugar through his teeth before it dissolves completely. He's left with the lingering taste of vanilla, light and creamy.

"Where are we going?" He asks after a minute. "You said I'd like it. Can we go outside?"

"Unfortunately not," Wilbur says. "Dear old Uncle Techno says you're not allowed out of the stronghold. However, there is the next best thing."

"Uncle Techno?" Tommy hurries forward a step and a half, coming up to Wilbur's side.

"Why do you call him that? And what's the next best thing?"

"You'll see," Wilbur placates. "Be patient. And I call Technoblade uncle because he practically is one to me, and he hates it."

"Hates the fact he's like an uncle or because you call him one?" Tommy asks.

"That I call him one," Wilbur says. "He and my father are best friends. He's my godfather. My family, despite his complaints."

Something hurts inside Tommy when Wilbur says that. Maybe it's the exorbitant amounts of taffy he's had this morning, or maybe it's the fact that he is very, very lonely, but something about the word family strikes him. His stomach twists, and he nearly stumbles. It hits him then. He's the odd one out—alone. No family. Not even a mother or father to miss him. Only Dream, who's in hiding and can't even give Tommy a hug.

"Tommy?" Without realizing it, he's stopped in the center of the hallway. Wilbur had clearly taken a few steps before noticing and now he's turned, watching him with a mildly concerned look. "Are you alright?"

He snaps himself out of it. "Fine," he says. "Just thinking about all the blackmail opportunities you've given me." Besides, his brain is being stupid. Tommy has family, and it's Dream, and he'll get back to him one way or another. Home, to Caterwaul, to find his heart once more.

"Best not be blackmailing me," Wilbur teases, evident by the glint in his eye. Tommy shrugs.

"Either you or him," he says. "Everything's useful."

"Little brat," Wilbur says, but again, it's slightly fond. "Sneaky. Come on, we're nearly there."

"You still haven't said where we're going," Tommy insists. They've been going deeper into the stronghold— he knows that the palace is not just surface-level. It descends into the mountain, the windows disappearing altogether the farther inside you go. Carved out of stone and reinforced with runes, Tommy counts how many glimmering enchantments he can spot on beams and different areas of walls. Lanterns are replaced with soul-light, the blue glistening and filling the halls with a fake imitation of day. They take a left, and then a right, and then go through a door into another hall and Wilbur must know this place like the back of

his hand because Tommy is already lost. He decides here and now to sneak the blueprints out of the library and memorize them.

And then they go through another door, and the soul-light from the lanterns fades into something more natural. Sunlight. It's bright— Tommy has to blink away stars as they step into... a garden.

Grass gently crumples under his boots, the chill of the stronghold melting away into a humid, warm feeling. It sticks to his face and Tommy is sweaty in three seconds, but it's a good kind of sweat. The room smells like the air down south— heavy with wet, clinging to the back of your throat. Trees extend upwards, their branches stretching towards a glass roof that lets a gentle bit of sunlight dapple the floor and makes Tommy squint. He takes a step forward, and then two. Flower beds mark out pathways, tamped dirt weaving in and out of the trees. Somewhere, Tommy can hear the sound of water running, the soft rustle of leaves as an artificial wind gently cradles them.

"What do you think?" Wilbur asks quietly as Tommy takes another step forward, head tilted up, the sun on his face. It is warm.

He doesn't bother answering the prince. Instead, he reaches up and unclips his cloak, tugging off the warm woolen overshirt too, until he's just left in a sweater vest and long sleeve. He leaves the extra layers in a pile on the ground, then promptly darts forward and into the rest of the room.

It's large, almost deceptively so. He ducks behind trees and drags his hand along the bark, ignoring the call of Wilbur's voice behind him in favor of stomping through a flowerbed and picking carefully over another once he realizes. He finds the water source— piped out of one of the walls, a babbling brook with water so cold it shocks his fingers. Wilbur catches up to him there, when Tommy's stubbornly sticking his hand all the way in and getting the droplets on his sleeve.

"I'm taking this as a sign you like it," he says with a laugh, his own cloak slung over his shoulder and other hand in his pocket. Tommy looks up at him and gives him one short nod.

"Yes," he says, and then the urge to explore more is too great to ignore. He pulls his hand from the water and wipes it on his shirt, glancing around. There, just between the trees— "What is that?" He asks, ignoring the clear paths on the ground in order to push through the trees and step out onto a flat, open area. It's mostly short grass, the soft kind that bends under your hands and doesn't make your skin itch. But in the very center is a patch of dirt, no grass at all, worn down by endless footprints.

"We spar here, sometimes," Wilbur says. "Well. I say we, when I really mean my father and Techno, and sometimes my mother. I learned how to swordfight here as well, although I'm a bit rusty."

"You don't practice in the courtyard?" Tommy asks, turning his head to look at him.

"Gets too cold in the winter," Wilbur explains. "This is nicer. It's a good place to just sit, too."

As if on cue, Wilbur falls into the grass. It's a graceful fall, one that ends with him sprawled out in the sun and smiling absently up towards the glass sky. Tommy stares down at him. Wilbur rummages in one of his pockets and pulls a piece of taffy out. He holds it up, offers it to Tommy with an open, flat palm.

He takes it, sinking into the grass beside the prince.

"So," Wilbur says, as Tommy tears open this new candy and pops it into his mouth. Peppermint. "Do you feel any better?"

He considers his answer as the taffy melts in his mouth. The sun makes his head feel warm and fuzzy, and despite the fact he's sweating with all the layers, if he tips his head the right way and pretends, he almost feels like he's home. In the gardens of the palace at Caterwaul, breathing in the sweet summer air and watching the sails of the ships as they come up the river. No war, no pain. Just him.

"Maybe," he says through the gummy sweet. "A bit."

"The sun helps," Wilbur says. "We'll get you out here once a day until the depression's gone."

"I don't think it works like that," Tommy says, thinking of the lethargy that has crept into his very soul as the winter approaches. Wilbur sighs, tipping his own head back to face the sun. It catches on the strands of his hair, paints his face in golden shadow and light. His cheekbones arch high, chin pouty, and he looks not sad, but almost contemplative.

"No," he says. "You're right. It doesn't. But it helps."

Maybe it does. Maybe it doesn't. So long as there is light, there is darkness, and Tommy knows that the sun can only drown out so much.

For now, he tips his head to the sky and lets the taffy melt over his tongue. Worries, yes, but for another day.



They take their lunches in the atrium now.

The days settle into a new type of routine. Tommy wakes with the sun (later and later each day) and finds Wilbur at his door. A piece of taffy is pressed into his hand when he's presentable— and if he's not, it's withheld. (He always gets a piece by the time their brunches are over, sticky sweet and half-melted by the warmth of the sun and from being in Wil's

pocket.) He and Wilbur find a strange sort of balance, mixing sharp insults with a joking tone, sometimes genuine, sometimes not. They speak of surface-level things at first, and then in the later days of the week, more serious topics.

“Why are you not married yet?” Tommy asks out of the blue one day. The sun is hidden behind the clouds today, and their lunch spread is on the grass beneath them. A gingham blanket beneath Tommy’s butt, the grass tickling his toes. He’s shed his boots in favor of feeling the dirt on his feet.

“Pardon?” Wilbur asks, tipping his head and popping another grape in his mouth after he’s finished choking on the first one. “I’m afraid I think I might’ve misheard.”

“Married,” Tommy reiterates. “You. You’re the emperor’s only son.”

“Well.” Wilbur almost seems flushed, his cheeks red, his laugh peppering the air. It’s come more freely than ever before. “What you said— I am the emperor’s only son.”

“And?” Tommy prompts. Dream had spoken to him more than once on the topic— the requirements of children and wives. He hadn’t found it at all appealing. Not one bit. But Wilbur was Crown Prince— surely that was enough to initiate a conversation about it?

Wilbur pauses, shaking his head slightly and licks his lip. He inhales, letting out a long breath. “I think I will take my leave for the afternoon,” he says, not unkindly. Tommy wants to argue the point (perhaps Wilbur is hiding something, and that is juicy gossip that Tommy is not immune to) but something in the way Wilbur looks at him gives him pause. The prince’s glasses are tucked into the collar of his shirt, and he pulls them out to place them once more on his nose.

“But we haven’t even finished lunch,” Tommy says, and he knows he sounds a bit like a petulant child whining for their mother but he’s right. Lunch has barely been touched.

“Come on,” Wilbur says, shifting to get up. “You’ll find yourself with more sustenance somewhere else. Up you go.”

Tommy does not find himself in the mood to argue. He goes.

Their days continue. Tommy finds himself in tutoring, of all things. He’d never had a proper tutor before, not since he was six or seven. Dream had taken the role upon himself, teaching Tommy a great many things as they’d gone about their daily life as king and advisor. The Empire’s tutors are hardly anything like that. He spends some time listening to the dreadful drawl of their lecture before making his move to escape. He will not spend his afternoons so boring, listening to history he already knows and memorizing equations he will never use.

“Tommy,” Kristin says as he opens the door to the day room. There is a host of ladies inside— he nearly shrinks back at the way their heads all turn to face him, like a flock of strange birds. “Oh no, do come in. Although, if I recall correctly, you should be in with the professor.”

“That old guy was putting me to sleep,” Tommy says, slipping inside the door. He’s being watched, all eyes on him. Kristin’s are warm, though, and he leans against the shut door with



care. “And I was easily able to outrun him.” That sends a laugh among the group in the room, and he smiles nervously.

“Well then,” the empress says with a laugh of her own. She sets the book down from her hands, and pats the sofa beside her. “Come sit. Tell us some stories of grand escapades.”

He creeps over, stepping over the long blue fabric of one of the ladies’ garments, ignoring the whiffs of flowers and perfumes. He sits, and Kristin moves to pull a strand of grass he hadn’t noticed out of his hair. He flushes— they all laugh again.

“Well?” She prompts. Tommy inhales, and then exhales.

“One time,” he begins, “I stole a horse from the stables.”

And so instead of being taught things he already knows, Tommy spends his afternoons with the Empress. Some might say he is far too old to be spending time with her and the ladies-in-waiting, but Tommy finds he likes it. He keeps quiet, except when they ask for stories of his home. He listens to them sing and gossip, and occasionally, he sings for them as well. Small things— just a tune on the piano here and there, but whenever he plays, the Empress lights up like a star. He likes it when she smiles, laughing loudly in the same way Wilbur does. They have the same laugh and smile, he notices. Maybe it’s why they get along so well— whenever Wilbur stops by for a chat in the afternoons, Kristin and he are nearly inseparable, their amusement clear in the way they snicker and poke fun. Not at Tommy, but with him. He is somehow included in their little bundle of gossip now, and it’s fun learning about the lords and their families, the scandals, the little side jokes that he makes Wilbur explain to him.

He sees very little of Emperor Philza and General Technoblade. What he does see of them comes in stressed, brief moments. Bags decorate the underside of their eyes, and Tommy only feels a little vindictive about it. The burden of king is off his shoulders for the moment, and it’s... nice.

That is, until Wilbur and he step into the atrium one day, and there is the sound of other people talking already filling the air.

Hesitantly, he falls back. Behind Wilbur, behind the trees that he has gotten to know so well over the past week or two. Wilbur has no such reluctance— he forges forward into the foliage with a wide smile. Tommy still follows, but further back this time. He pauses at the edge of the clearing, the one he and Wilbur eat their breakfast or lunch in, and takes in the scene.

Kristin is in the meadow, their usual gingham picnic blanket spread out on the grass. Blue and white, of course. There’s a spread of food out on it, again, the usual. But the empress is not alone. Beside her is Philza and beside him, Technoblade. Both of them are out of their formal regalia, Technoblade’s armor discarded yet again for a simple white shirt and sash. Philza is still wearing a cloak, draped warm over his shoulders and the silver embroidery glistening in the light of the sun above them. Wilbur is traipsing along through the grass and smiling wide, a hand raised in greeting. Philza says something that Tommy doesn’t catch, and Wilbur responds, and then they all turn to look towards Tommy.

“Well?” Kristin’s voice pitches high above the low droning of Technoblade’s, cutting him off.  
“Good morning.”

He stays by the trees. Uncertainty rises in him, the same type of feeling he gets when the moon is visible in the middle of the day. Hesitant. Frightened, but he wouldn’t admit it. The mornings with Wilbur had become something special, something uniquely theirs. And the change is terrifying in a way he would never admit. Philza has encroached on everything in his life, it seems. First his kingdom, then his palace, and now what little salvation he has found in the north.

Wilbur raises a hand, beckoning.

“Come on, Tommy,” he says. Tommy does not trust Wilbur, not as far as he can throw him. But then he twists his hand slightly, and a taffy appears in his palm. Not a bribe. Maybe something more akin to a promise. The wrapping is yellow and pink. (He has kept all of them in a drawer in his room.)

Like a fawn lured from its mother, Tommy steps into the clearing and into the hunter’s mark.

Kristin smiles at him as he snatches up the taffy from Wilbur’s hand and sinks to the grass beside the blanket, knees in the dirt and hands in his lap. Philza is smiling too, the crow’s feet beside his eyes crinkling with the action. Technoblade is more stoic, but his posture is relaxed, face turned upwards slightly and kneeling with a tilt, one palm pressed to the ground.

“Pup,” he says, and Tommy scowls.

“I’ve decided that if you get to call me that, I get to call you whatever I please,” Tommy informs him, and then, with a savage grin. “Uncle.”

“Absolutely not,” Technoblade deadpans, looking over towards the emperor, who is consumed in laughter that rebounds throughout the whole atrium. “Phil, tell him to knock it off.”

“What did I say about blackmailing, gremlin?” Wilbur asks, a hand cuffing the top of Tommy’s head gently as the prince sinks to the ground beside him. Tommy sets to work unwrapping the taffy.

“I think you said not to blackmail *you*,” Tommy points out, popping the candy into his mouth. It’s good. “But nothing about the general. Why are they here?”

“Because I invited them,” Kristin says gently. She’s in a blue gown, long sleeves tucked over her fingers. “And Wilbur invited me.”

“More like she dragged us here,” Philza says, having apparently gotten control of his breath once more. “We’re still in the throes of organizing.”

“Sneeg and Sophie can handle it for a morning,” Kristin insists, her smiling tilting as she looks over to her husband, reaching out to cup his cheek in his hand. “Relax.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, “Relax. Give me an opening to use the knife I’ve been stowing away.” Silence. He looks around at their faces, ending on the tense set of Technoblade’s shoulders. Through the taffy: “What? I’m kidding.”

“Not a very funny joke,” Technoblade huffs, and Philza elbows him in the side. Wilbur reaches out, snapping a grape off the stem and then a piece of cheese.

“I thought it was quite clever,” he says, leaning back in the grass and resting his head against his mother’s shoulder. “Tommy, calm down.”

“I am calm,” Tommy reasons. He’s not at all, he’s actually quite angry, but he’s not about to say that aloud and try to pass it off as a quip. “You all are just reading into it too much.”

“Kris tells me you’ve been slowly working your way through the library,” Philza says. Tommy keeps his hands in his lap for now, working the waxy surface of the taffy paper in his fingers over and over. Philza’s poor excuse to change the subject gets him thinking. He needs to get back to the library, see if Karl has anything. “Reading every book you can get your hands on. Have you found a favorite yet?”

No, Tommy wants to shout. The library is just an excuse, just like the famine was an excuse for you, like how guilt was an excuse for Wilbur. He twists his hands and shakes his head instead. “No,” he says, but instead of telling the truth, he lies. Again and again. “The books here are annoying. I hate turning pages. Scrolls are better. Plus, the stories are shit.”

“You were just telling me about the tales from the End,” Kristin jumps in, and Tommy wants to yell. “It sounded like you enjoyed them.”

“Only because I’ve never read them before,” Tommy reasons. “We didn’t have much out of Libra in the palace at home. How—” He pauses, and then forces himself to continue. “How is Caterwaul?”

“Tommy talks a lot about it,” Wilbur says, before Philza can answer. “Caterwaul. Are the roofs of every house gold, like he says?”

“Hardly,” Technoblade says. “I think you’ll find that he lies more often than not.”

“I am not a liar,” Tommy insists. “How dare you.”

“Well, are they really gold?” Wilbur turns to look at him with a smirk, one that leaves Tommy feeling more flustered than anything else.

“I—” He stutters, trying to find the right words. “He— it’s a little more— I mean— well. I didn’t *lie*. But I may have... exaggerated. A few times. *Some* of the roofs are golden. The dome over Church. The palace. Um, Juniper Street Market. At noon, the whole city shines.” Tommy gets quiet, and his mind is no longer in the Empire. Instead, it’s back in the Isles, his feet dancing along the edge of the Angwat. “When the boats come in,” he says, “you can see their sails over the rooftops, and they look like giant white birds. They smell like... fish, or grapes, and it’s always salty. The river, that is. Because it connects to the ocean.”

“It sounds lovely,” Kristin says quietly, snapping him out of his reverie. He looks up, catching her gaze as she tips her head to smile at him. “Beautiful.”

“It is,” Tommy says firmly. “The most beautiful place in the world.”

“You’ll be glad to know it’s fine, then,” Philza says. “No harm has come to it, or the people. Although there is still a curfew. Just for safety’s sake. No fighting. It’s all ceased. Your soldiers have been sent home.”

“All of them?” Tommy asks, thinking of the palace guards and the pyres in Hopsfield.

“All of them,” Philza assures. “Now, I believe my wife invited Techno and I here for breakfast, not work. In fact, I had assumed this was going to be a break from it.”

“Telling Tommy how his homeland is doing is hardly work,” Wilbur points out.

“But it is,” Technoblade laments. Something makes Tommy pause, makes his fingers still over the endless fidgeting, makes his hackles rise. The hair on the back of his neck tingles, and he is suddenly very, very upset. Almost for no reason, and yet, there is reason, isn’t there? “Work?” He asks, throat thick and stuffy all of the sudden. The sugar from the taffy does not help, clogging up his system and making his mouth taste rancid. What the hell is wrong with them all? “My home, my people, they’re just work to you now?”

“Well,” Technoblade says, “yes? Running a country is hard, much less two of them.”

“Enough.” Kristin’s voice is firm and commanding, and Tommy snaps his neck to look at her, glaring still as she looks between them all with a flare to her nostrils. Wilbur picks his head up, hanging it down and subtly reaching for another bit of cheese. Tommy doesn’t think he can eat—his stomach flips. “No fighting, you both promised.”

“But it’s not work,” Tommy insists, kicking back a bit further from the picnic blanket and glaring at all of them now. “It’s my life. I’m not some clay figurehead—” He glares purposefully at Philza with that one, and watches as the emperor meets his gaze, stony. “—or a pet you can just keep around after you— after you took me from my home.”

“I mean,” Wilbur says, tipping his head and gesturing with a hand to the crinkled paper in Tommy’s grasp. “It’s been working well enough.”

“To keep me in line,” Tommy says with a sneer, the cold dread of realization dripping down his spine. Melting icicles in spring, their frozen water making him shiver. “To— to keep me here, do you even know what you’re doing?” He asks, and now he truly scrambles away and up, backing away on his knees and then clambering to his feet and taking a step away. The picturesque morning has frosted over, a cloud passing over the bright sun and casting all of the Empire’s royal family in shadow. “Do you even have a— a plan for me? Keeping me? Sending me to an island when the winter’s over? What happens when I get old enough to argue back my kingdom? What will you do then?” A dark room, a flickering lantern-light, curtains shifting in a non-existent wind as a quiet assassin leaves no trace. He remembers the utter fear when the messenger from Dream had arrived, and how he’d borne the colors of the Empire in his quest to reach Tommy. What if, next time, the messenger is not a messenger at

all? “Kill me? I’ll be older then. You won’t have the soul of a child smeared on your conscience.”

“Tommy,” Kristin says, and she no longer looks stern but devastated. “Sweetheart—”

“Don’t,” he says, breath coming heavy and frightened as he stares down the people who very well may become his executioners. Tommy knows what he would do in Philza’s position. Death, the most brutal mistress. He takes another step back. “It’s a lie,” he says. “You’re all liars. Fucking— liars. Fuck you.”

“I have never lied to you,” Philza says, lifting his chin. “All we want to do is help you, Thomas. There is more going on than you think— your advisors, they spoke of someone guiding your hand. What you were doing wasn’t you, it wasn’t your choice—”

“No.” He’s talking about Dream. Of course he is. Oh, those rotten rat bastards who’d snitched. Tommy will have their fucking heads. Vengeance was never Tommy’s favorite color, and yet here he is, basking in it. “No, I was king. I made the decisions. I was raised from birth to do so.”

“Your kingdom is a mess, Thomas,” Philza says. It’s gentler than Tommy would like. “We’re only just getting a hand on it now.”

“I made the choices,” Tommy insists, because his mind won’t let go of the previous sentiment. “For my people, for their— for them— I— I did it all, yeah?”

“You should show him,” Wilbur murmurs, dragging his hand along the grass beside the picnic blanket. He’s been watching this whole time, eyes lowered but studious as Tommy’s tried to pull away. His feet can only carry him so far, after all, and they are not outside. The atrium has its boundaries like any other room. Wilbur’s eyes simmer with golden heat, in the way a furnace blast sears your skin, the way an open oven burns your forearms. He is sun poisoning, a deceptively cloudy day making you think you’re safe from scorching.

“Fuck off,” Tommy tells him eloquently. Then: “Show me what?”

“Wilbur,” Technoblade says. “Enough.”

“No, no no no,” Tommy says, holding out a hand. “Show me *what* ?”

The silence is telling enough. Philza’s lips are thin and stressed, Kristin’s face turned away as she studies the far-off branch of some bush across the atrium. Wilbur is stone cold and distant, his hands fidgeting in his lap. In turn, Technoblade is deadly still except for the rise and fall of his chest. Tommy watches them, their strange family of four, and swallows hard.

“Show me what,” he repeats, demanding it.

“The numbers don’t add up,” Philza says finally, speaking up and breaking the silence. Above them all, trees rustle and leaves shake. This room is full of magic, tangible and real. It has to be in order to keep the plants alive, warmth written into the very bedrock of the floor and inscribed onto the walls. If Tommy looks hard enough, at just the right angle, he can see

the faint glow of runes and enchantments glistening. It is a truly magical place, but right now, it feels more like a lie than ever. Philza continues. “When I got the paperwork from your study, the advisors. I was doing the math over and over in my head, thinking somehow I’d gotten it wrong. The reports from farmer’s taxes didn’t add up, and so I looked more into it. I brought Techno in. I asked Kristin to review them. Wil too. We all saw it. There was just this... missing bit of grain.”

“Not a bit,” Kristin says, her voice apologetic. “Thousands of bushels. Mostly grains. Wheat.”

“Raw materials,” Philza says, and Tommy slowly sinks to the ground, his knees hitting the grass and spreading dew across the fabric of his pants. “Some vegetable shipments, too. A tax would be recorded, and half of it would be gone by the time it reached the capital. Only sometimes. Not always. Just enough that if one were tired enough, stressed enough, young enough—” Tommy bites back the urge to snap at him, “—you could miss it. But it added up. It added up to a significant amount in just a few months. And so I sent people out, asked questions.”

“No,” Tommy says quietly. “No, I did all that— I handled that, I oversaw—”

“Tommy, we found some of it,” Philza says, and he looks *sad* for some reason. Like he has a reason to be sad. “In a rural part of the Isles, on a plot of land registered under the royal insignia. Food. Rotting away in silos and barns.”

“Liar,” Tommy says, because he can remember going through the notes himself, the logbooks, checking numbers against each other late at night after everyone else but Dream and himself had gone to bed. “I knew what I was doing. You’re a liar.”

“We didn’t even find all of it,” Philza says. “But it was rotting. Some of it was destroyed. And not— not just stuff that could happen in transport. Burned. It was intentional. We found the men who did it. They said it was a royal order.”

“You are *lying to me*,” Tommy insists, his fingers tearing at the grass beneath them and ripping it to shreds. He doesn’t care about their stupid perfect lawn.

“I can show you the paperwork,” Philza says, shaking his head. “The inconsistencies. I have men who saw it with their own two eyes, men I trust.” He spreads a hand outwards, face open and pleading but Tommy’s not going to fall for it. He can’t fall for something as simple as this. Philza is planting seeds in his mind, ones of distrust and of disloyalty, but he knows better than that. He’s been taught better than that. Tommy pushes his hand into the earth and sinks his fingers into the soil, letting it stick under his fingernails as he digs them into the cool, soft grains. He’d run through those papers that Philza is talking about before, because they’d been on rations in the capital, because the food situation wasn’t bad but it wasn’t good either. The Isles had lost just as much land as the Empire had during the Cataclysm— the entire Bay of the Fallen had flooded, taking it’s fields with it.

“I don’t want to see it,” Tommy says, “Because it’s wrong. *You* are wrong. And I know what— I know you’re— I can see what you’re trying to do. And I’m not going to let it happen.”

“Denial is one hell of a drug,” Wilbur says, just loud enough for Tommy to hear it, and that’s what makes him snap in the end. He lifts his arm and throws the clod of dirt he’d been gripping vaguely in the prince’s direction— it probably falls short, he doesn’t care— and shoves himself back to his feet, staggering slightly as the blood rushes to his head.

“Fuck you,” he spits. “I knew the ins and outs of the Isles better than anyone else. I could tell you the fucking census numbers if you asked, the average number of bushels a farm gave in tax, the price of honey on the street corner. I know *everything* about my kingdom. You know nothing. You hardly even stayed to see it— you just came in, took your stupid victory and left. You don’t know shit, bitch.”

“I might not know anything, sure,” Philza says. “You’re right. But I *can* do math. The numbers don’t lie.”

“But you do,” Tommy counters. “You lie. And I won’t listen to it.”

He turns on his heel, he can hear behind him the ruffle of clothing as someone stands, hands reaching out to catch him— but they fall short, and he ducks between trees and flowerbeds, ignoring the calls of his name behind him.

Maybe he shouldn’t have asked about it. Maybe living in ignorance would’ve been a better choice— it’s blissful, isn’t it? Not being aware of your own failures?

Not to mention, the implications of something slipping through his fingers and Dream’s alike. Either he genuinely had fucked up, allowing it to happen under his nose, or someone else had. And that’s just— that’s literally unthinkable, the mere idea of betrayal, stinking and bloody. It sits on his shoulders and drags him down underneath the waves, the ocean surface getting farther and farther away with each day. Prime, he’s drowning despite there being no water in his lungs. Who knew the air was so thick?

The palace is large and he is constantly followed by guards but thankfully no one follows him out of the atrium. He is left alone to grieve— because that’s what he’s doing right now, isn’t he? He’s grieving. Something died in that country of his, and he’s not sure what. Some little part of him, perhaps. It feels like a ghost hanging over his shoulder; an old friend or brother. He’s just lost something, he knows. Something precious that Wilbur had been trying to build between them.

He might’ve said it was trust.

His feet carry him through the halls unsanctioned and he pushes open the doors he’d only seen once or twice since his arrival here in Raven’s Flight— doors decorated with holy faces and a head bowed in prayer. There’s a sanctuary here that’s graceful yet strange. Tommy pushes open the door to Prime’s sacrarium and lets a balm fall over his soul.

Dream had always raised him to be religious. The man himself had never been one to strictly follow the traditions but Tommy had always found more solace in the quiet respite of church than anyone else he knew. He loves it. He loves dipping his fingers into the water by the door, taking one of the warm bright colored wooden panels tied to the wall and wrapping the cord around his fingers as he makes his way to the front. A guard follows him in, but only

just to the door— they don't follow him all the way up to the altar. He's almost grateful for it. He's allowed a moment of fake privacy. The cord is tight and pinches his fingers when he lowers his head and mutters quietly one of the greeting prayers, one of well-wishes in hard times. He can't pretend to hear Prime say it back, but he wishes desperately she would. Tommy can't hog all the time at the altar, so after a few more muttered prayers, he slinks back down to the pews. Long stretches of wooden bench and a few mats in the back for those who choose to sit, but he stays by the front. He'd thought more people would be here than there actually *are* . The place is mostly empty, his steps echoing before he sits. Grasping the talisman tight by the body, he runs his fingers over the slightly-chipped paint and sighs. Pray, pray, wish for things to be different. No amount of *wishing* will ever be enough.

He tries anyway.

"Please," he says quietly, low enough under his breath that it won't echo in the small space of the chapel. Not like it matters anyways— he's the only one in here except the guards by the door, but he knows how palace staff talk. They gossip, and they spy. He knows. So he lowers his voice and squints his eyes closed and tips his head low to his chest, swallowing hard before continuing. "Please, just— give me a sign. If I'm doing this right. A nudge, maybe, in the right direction. I feel so lost, so— like I'm— it's—" He stutters to a halt, unsure of how to move forward. Like everything else in his life, adrift. "Come on," he eventually pleads, opening his eyes and glancing up at the statue of the lady Goddess above his head. "Just one little clue."

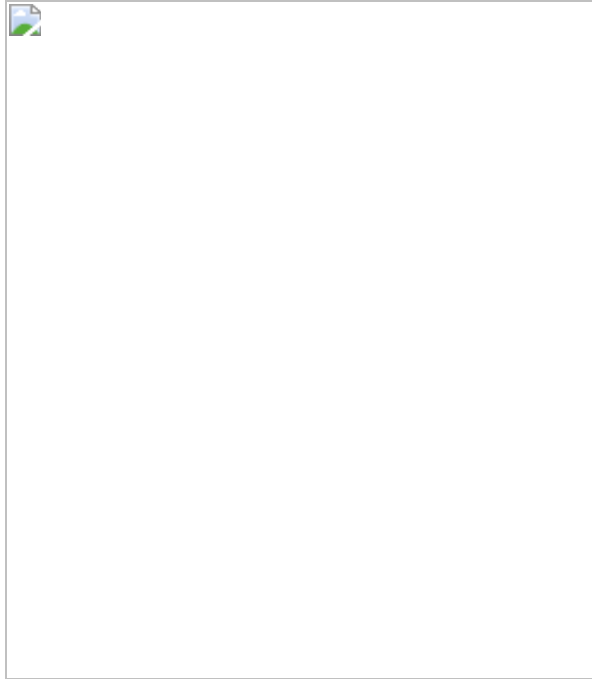
She says nothing, the painted purple of her skirts unmoving. She is stone, just like she was when Tommy first walked in. The candles flicker, the chimes tinkling slightly. There is no miracle or movement.

Eventually, he gets up from his seat. His butt hurts from the wood of the pew, his neck aching from how he'd held it still, staring up at Her. His chest feels tight.

The guards follow him as he steps out of the chapel, back into the cold stone hallways of the icy stronghold. The cold is getting to him. His boots click against the ground, echoing with the pairs behind him, and he heaves a sigh. He should've known better than to place his faith in others. Especially a Goddess— they will just hinder you. He has to do this himself. Fate is a tricky subject, as we have come to know intimately. Sometimes it will make itself known in strange ways. Others, it will disappear completely and leave you drowning in its absence. And sometimes, very rarely, it gives you a strong push down a certain road.

Tommy turns to head back to his bedroom (his pampered cell) and meets the eye of the librarian Karl Jacobs.





## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

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woooooooooooooooooo TAFFY TIMEEEEEEEEEEE!!! this is probably my favorite chapter of this entire arc, ngl. i just... i really like it. also we get some insight into behind the scenes of the isles... that's weird, huh? some new info.

the questions only keep coming. fear not. they will be answered at some point (i dare not say soon but. soon enough!)

reminder to kudos and comment if ur enjoying :) i feel very pretentious writing this story but it really is my baby and so much work has gone into it so ;-; i just love talking about it and stuff.

in fact, u can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc III. - weep little lion man

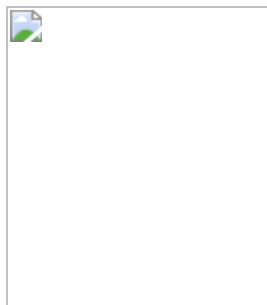
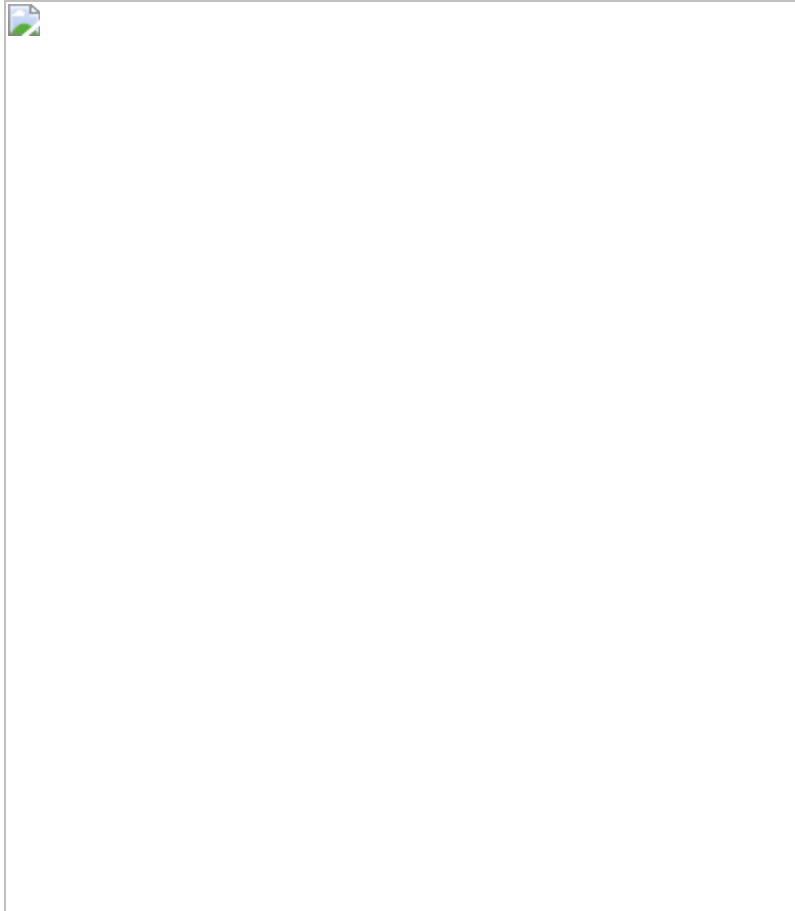
### Chapter Summary

tw: n/a

this chapter was beta'd by the lovely TJ/definitelynotshouting!!!!

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Karl hurries over to him, feet clicking gently against the stone as his robes flutter around him. The style is long and flowing, his arms poking out from slits in the over cloak that swirl with color. Tommy knows each color represents something different, something that Karl has studied or seen or experienced, but he doesn't know enough about them to recognize it. Regardless, they make quite a scene as he bounds up to Tommy, his face bright and eyes sharp. Still purple. Tommy thinks back to what the messenger had said, that first night– he's from Libra. Newly introduced to the rest of the Continent, Karl has probably spent his adult life traveling as much as he can.

"Your Grace," he says kindly, fingers twisting in front of him. "You said to come find you when the other star charts came in."

There is meaning behind his words, one that Tommy can only pray is good.

"I did," he says, acutely aware of the eyes and ears behind him. "Are they ready?"

"I wouldn't have sought you out if they weren't," Karl says simply, then reaches into the long, stretching folds of his cloak and pulls out a scroll. Tommy is eager– his hands move before he consciously tells them to, pulling at the parchment and running one hand over the top of it.

"Thanks," he says. "I saw Livia a few nights ago, rising higher."

"She does do that in winter," Karl explains, tipping his head to the parchment. "Maybe you'll pull some meaning from these, Your Highness. The palace astronomers would welcome you at their table any time." Some meaning. Tommy hopes whatever is in this scroll– and it is heavier than a normal scroll, something square and hard in the center of it where Tommy's fingers grip to keep it from slipping out and onto the floor– he hopes whatever it is, it has some kind of hopeful meaning. His prayers to Prime have certainly been answered.

"It's just a hobby," he chokes out, desperate to end the conversation that is ripe with double entendres and quiet, purposeful looks. He needs to see what Dream has sent him. Has to. He needs to talk to him, but he can't right now and so this will have to do.

"I understand," Karl says, gently tipping his head. "I won't keep you. I know the prince has been keeping you busy, so. Have a good day."

"You too," Tommy says, nodding back in turn as Karl gives him the most subtle of winks. Then he turns, and in a flash of color and footsteps, disappears around the corner. Tommy's fingers curl around the scroll in his hand, the sharp edges of the box in the center crumpling the paper and stinging, sharp.

When he finally is alone, he pulls the scroll out of his pocket again. It had taken a moment to get back to his room, hiding from the guards who now linger outside his door, and Tommy waits a few minutes before he unfurls the parchment. It crinkles as it goes, as he spreads it wide over his bedspread, smoothing out the wrinkles and holding down the corners as they

curl inwards, desperate to return to their rolled-up state. He doesn't let them, though, instead staring at the tiny box in the center of the star charts.

The constellations are the only ones watching as he picks up the box, turns it over in his palm. It's small, small enough to be hidden away in pockets and paper, tucked and smuggled in. He's... almost scared to open it.

He's scared. Tommy, King of the Isles, is scared. Because someone had been lying to him, and he hopes it's not who he thinks it is, because if it is that means he truly has no one left who he can trust. He's alone, a tiny sailboat of his own design in the center of a monsoon, and by Prime he's taking on water by the gallons. Dream wouldn't have lied to him though, would he? They had a pact— complete and utter honesty. Tommy told Dream everything, and Dream returned the favor. A gear cannot turn without a lever, a rune cannot harness magic without a scribe. Codependency meant that their secrets were safe with the other, and the difficulties of running a kingdom would not fall on Tommy's shoulders alone. He thinks of the numbers, of Philza's claim of rotting food, and slowly takes a breath.

Mistakes can be made. He'd rather have the benefit of the doubt than mistakenly accuse Dream and lose his allyship, his brotherhood. With gentle hands, he pries open the lid of the box and peers inside.

Gleaming emerald stares back at him. There's no note, no paper— just a small, simple piece of darkened iron with a gem set into the metal.

He'd thrown this broach off the side of the palace more than a week ago. It's even slightly dented on one side, like it had struck hard stone and bounced off to land somewhere inaccessible.

Tommy reaches into the box and takes it out, cradling the jewelry in his palm. The empress had given this to him his first day here— and he'd *thrown* it, he'd gotten rid of it because he'd hated what it stood for, hated that he sought comfort from it in those moments of terror. And Dream had taken the time to find it again and return it to him— why?

There's a few subtle messages here. One of them Tommy can easily decipher: I am watching you.

There's some relief in that idea. Tommy is not alone, even when he thinks he is; and it is a comforting thought, no matter what. He doesn't *want* to be alone in this cold palace. And there are eyes everywhere, none of them welcoming, so the idea that at least there is someone out there on his side that is keeping tabs; well, Tommy has never felt so surrounded. Contrast to this morning, when he'd been in a room full of people and yet still that loneliness had been there, an ache in his chest that refuses to budge.

But there's something nagging in the corner of Tommy's mind when he looks at the broach, running the tips of his fingers over the finesharp edge of it and turning it in the light so it glimmers. Something else, something important. The empress had given this to him and he'd rejected it (and he isn't stupid, he'd seen the emeralds hanging off of Philza's ear, buried in Technoblade's hair, glistening on Wilbur's fingers) but now, Dream has given it back to him. He has to know what it means to the people of the palace. Is it a promise? An

acknowledgement? Some sort of guidance? When Tommy turns back to the small box, tearing it apart in his desperation for answers, he finds none. There is no note hidden in the back of the wood, no runes engraved, nothing. This is a message and Tommy is failing in figuring it out. He's failing again. And it fucking sucks.

He'd prayed earlier. With sweet honey tone and holy water on his fingertips, his forehead, his hands, he'd prayed. He'd asked their Lady to *please, please, send him a sign*, and here it is. Here is Her sign and it's from Dream, which is a sign in itself, and he's sitting here and he can't fucking decipher it.

What the fuck is wrong with him these days? It's like his mind is filled with fog, the same kind of mist that always hung over Caterwaul in the mornings on bright sunny days that followed cool, chilly nights. Tommy lifts his hand and bats it in front of his face, like that might do something to clear his mind, when in reality it just makes him look dumb. He sighs, gripping the emerald in one palm and running his thumb over the dented edge of the metal. It's almost sharp under his fingertips, the pin in the back sticking into his palm and making him wince. Cold, too. It freezes against his fingers.

At least he'd made some part of the Empire less pristine. The broach is imperfect now, slightly dingy from Tommy's own hand. It's a tiny bit of rebellion, but not enough. Tommy wants them to hurt, and the sudden flash of rage he feels is dizzying. He wants the Empire to dent, wants them to feel the same kind of loneliness and despair he is feeling right now. Revenge is a dish best served cold, and he is stuck in the middle of a frozen wasteland.

An idea, quiet and thrumming in the back of his mind.

*You've got people on your side*, Dream's messengers had said. Karl and the assassin, and Dream himself. Surely Sapnap and others. People on his side. People who are angry with the Emperor, like the hungry faces he'd seen in the street. There must be some resentment out there, especially as winter comes and with the war won, no food relief in sight.

Maybe, if Tommy plays his cards right, he can be the dent in the Empire's side—

No. Well. Maybe.

He runs his thumb over the edge of the broach. There's the beginning of an idea, churning in the dark waters of his own angry tide.



Tomorrow comes, as it always does.

“Get up,” Wilbur says, already settling back into their routine despite the disaster that had been yesterday. Tommy glares, curling further under his bedsheets and shoving his face into his pillows. He does not dignify the prince with a response. He is angry with Wilbur, and the treacherous thoughts from yesterday are still bouncing around in his mind. He imagines taking a sword to Wilbur’s neck and *that* is a sickening thought, so he tries to avoid looking at him as much as he can. The pillows are blessedly cool when he sticks his face and neck into them. Wilbur takes the moment to rip the quilt off of Tommy’s body though, and–

“Fuck, it’s cold!” he shouts, muffled into the fabric of the bed. Wilbur laughs.

“Come get dressed,” he says. “And dress warm. I don’t have any taffy for you today.”

“Then I’m not getting up,” Tommy says simply, curling in on himself like a pillbug. Maybe he can disappear into his shell entirely. “Get out.”

“I have something better than taffy,” Wilbur says, sing-song. “Come on little king, we’re having breakfast in the square.”

“The square?” Tommy asks, blearily lifting his head. Wilbur is grinning at him, already wide awake and dressed for... something. He’s got a warmer cloak than normal, and Tommy notes the gloves tucked into one of his pockets.

“Yes, Tommy, the square. Downtown,” Wilbur says, as if going outside is the easiest thing in the world.

“I’m not allowed out there,” he says cautiously, sitting up. Wilbur meanders along the edge of the bed, pacing back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back.

“And?” he questions.

And...

That’s a good point. Tommy’s never let stupid *rules* stop him before.

When they’re out in the corridor a few minutes from then, Wilbur hands Tommy a few things. One, a set of mittens, cozy and soft and warm around his fingers as he tugs them onto his hands. Outside the day is grey and cold, clouds covering the wide blue expanse of the sky. The second thing Wilbur hands him is a piece of taffy.

“Liar,” Tommy accuses, his mouth full of sweetness. “You’re a nasty liar.”

“I also have higher security clearance than anyone else in the palace save my parents and uncle,” Wilbur points out with a grin, walking backwards and tracking Tommy with his eyes. “So, how would you like to spend the morning? I know I mentioned breakfast, but the whole town is abuzz. There’s plenty to do.”

“Are you serious?” Tommy asks, running his tongue over the back of his teeth. “We’re going out?”

Wilbur stops in the middle of the hallway, still backwards. Tommy stops too, a few inches short of bumping into the older boy.

“Yes,” Wilbur says, peering down at him. “You’ll be good, right?”

“... Depends,” Tommy says carefully, staring right back up at him. He’s tired of being inside. Tired of seeing the same three or four rooms every day, only able to see the sky from his window or the windows in the day room. Wilbur puts a hand on his shoulder after a second, holding him still, and Tommy hadn’t even noticed he’d been bouncing slightly on his toes. His hand is warm, firm on his shoulder, and slowly he settles.

“Maybe,” Wilbur says. “If you are, we could probably go out again. We’ll see how much trouble we’re in when we get back today.”

“You’re taking the fall for this,” Tommy says, “right? They can’t blame me, ‘cause you’re being an enabler. You’re enabling me.”

“Sure,” Wilbur says, laughing a little as they start to walk once more. “Sure, I’ll take the fall. It was my idea. Come on, now.”

“Good. So... about breakfast?” Tommy’s stomach grumbles, just a bit. Taffy is good, but not exactly filling. “Are we going to eat?”

“We’re leaving through the kitchens,” Wilbur explains. “There’s a servant entrance down there, easier to get in and out.”

“And we can get a snack on the way,” Tommy says with a decisive nod, forging forwards and ignoring how Wilbur grins behind him— then stops, as something dawns on him. He turns.

“Where are the kitchens again?” he asks weakly. Wilbur breaks out into a laugh.

They make it through the halls and down, past the Great Hall and Sunrise Room, and then farther down. Farther into the depths of a stronghold he has yet to fully grasp the magnitude of, lanterns eternally lit as the magic within them burns. They fill the hallways with warmth, as well— Tommy has a hunch about the lanterns, and if he takes a moment to study one to figure it out, well, sue him. Outside is cold, colder than anything he’s ever felt, but the lanterns inside have a heating-light rune, etched into the bottom of the metal and activated by flame. They heat the halls and bedrooms to stave off the cold. Some of it still penetrates the stone, but it’s better than it could be. For a brief moment, Tommy’s mind flits to the girl he met in Osprey. Clara, the girl named after Prime. He wonders if her mother’s tavern has lanterns lit like these to keep out the cold, or if they just shiver.

He wraps himself up in his arms after that thought, quiet as they slip through another door and into the— oh, so this is where the kitchen is.

“Your Majesty!” someone calls out, and a kind-looking woman is pinching the older boy’s cheek, making him bend low down in order to talk to her. The room is a stark difference from

the cold hallway outside— it is hot, steaming, filled with the bustle of people as they work to keep the palace in order. Smoke rises to holes and grates in the ceiling, pots of broth simmering away on huge stoves that are nearly as tall as Tommy is. Knives and pans hang from the ceiling, slabs of meat on a far wall covered in pepper or other spices.

“And our Majesty’s esteemed guest,” the woman is saying, and the room is so loud with the clank of metal and voices that Tommy sort of shrinks in on himself. Wilbur seems to notice— his eyes glint, arm moving just subtly until it comes to rest over his shoulders and draws Tommy into his side. Tommy is just the right height to be tucked under Wilbur’s cloak, the edge of it coming around his own shoulders as the head chef— is she the head chef, or the matron maybe?— leans in and peers at him. “He’s awfully skinny.”

“We’re working on it,” Wilbur says kindly, fingers warm on Tommy’s upper arm as he keeps him close, maneuvering around a large, long wooden table. “Speaking of. Have you got breakfast left?”

“I’m not skinny,” Tommy manages to argue, although he knows it’s true. “I’m going to grow, and get taller than Wilbur even. I’m just not there yet. But I will be!”

“Taller than me?” Wilbur asks, glancing down at him, the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

“Doubtful,” the older woman says, and her back is to them and a basket is beside her, various pastries and foodstuffs being packaged away for them. “His Majesty grows another inch every day, I swear. We’ll see what we can do about you, esteemed guest.”

“My name’s Tommy,” he says, and she turns, her face suddenly a craggy landscape of furrowed brows and sharp lines. She looks angry, almost, but then it smoothes out before he can catch whatever expression had been beneath the glare.

“I know your name, your Grace,” she says, and then the basket handle is being placed into Wilbur’s outstretched palm. The prince tugs slightly at Tommy’s shoulder, pulling him in more to his side until Wilbur is just a warm line of heat against Tommy’s entire left, head under his armpit and almost entirely swamped by his cobalt cloak.

“We’ll be off now,” he says, an edge to his voice that hadn’t been there before. Tommy glances between the two of them, confusion sinking low in his gut like a stone in a river. Wilbur keeps him close as they duck their heads to the matron and she curtsies low, shuffling off towards another door in the back like a pair of ducks. Tommy keeps his mouth wisely shut until they’re through the door, stepping out into a blast of cold air. The sky opens up above them, wide and grey, but the walls of the stronghold still rise around them. Outside, almost.

“What was that?” Tommy asks, dipping his head just so and wiggling out from under Wilbur’s hand. He lets him go, cloak rustling slightly in the soft breeze.

Wilbur ignores his question. “We’ll go through the outer ring and then down into the Fourth Ward,” he says, peering down into the basket of various breakfast snacks the matron had packed them. “Would you rather eat now or in the square?”

“The square,” Tommy answers immediately. Then: “You didn’t answer me. What was that?”



“Rumors spread quickly in a palace,” Wilbur says, tucking a small checkered cloth over the food and shutting the basket lid. He looks up at Tommy, squints. “You should know that.”

“I do,” he says. “Do they talk about me?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re *all* they talk about,” Wilbur counters. He holds out an arm. “Come on. Keep close, I don’t want you getting lost.”

“I wouldn’t get lost,” Tommy assures him, patting Wilbur’s arm and then leaving it hanging. “I’ve got a great sense of direction.”

That being said, Tommy finds himself perplexed by the layout of the stronghold. They’re no longer inside it— they sit outside the inner ring now, making their way through a courtyard that bays and bellows with the stench of animal shit and hay. Tommy gets little time to actually properly explore, as Wilbur hurries them along past the stalls of pigs and sheep and down a narrow set of crumbling stone steps. There’s a gated grate at the end, and Wilbur hands over the basket to him for a moment before raising his foot and giving the edge of it a few swift kicks. It clangs and clatters, and with one final blow crashes to the ground.

“Holy shit!” Tommy gasps in delight, grinning as Wilbur picks up the metal and leans it against the stone.

“I haven’t come out this way in a while,” he admits. “It gets stuck like that. We’ll leave it open.”

“You’re not very smart,” Tommy comments. Wilbur takes the basket back from his hand and they start down another long set of dilapidated stone stairs. He raises a brow even as the archway covers the sky, darkens the space around them. “You’re just telling me about an escape route? That’s like, a big fuckin’ security risk. I could just sneak out tonight when everyone’s asleep and come back down this way.”

“You think you’d make it down here on your own?” Wilbur teases, voice lilting slightly. It echoes, bouncing off the cold dripstone above them. “It’s a long walk from the domestic wing. And if not for me giving you clearance, you wouldn’t have gotten through some of those doors.”

“I could do it,” Tommy argues. “I’m sneaky as shit. I always snuck out in Caterwaul, just like this. Although, I could just crawl out the window if I wanted to jump the wall.”

“You crawled out a window?” Wilbur asks, sounding incredulous and definitely amused. “Just to get out of the palace there?”

“To be fair, the window was very large,” Tommy points out, bumping into Wilbur’s arm as they go. Ahead of them, the stairs flatten out into a passageway, damp water, moss and lichens guiding their way. “And usually open. The wall was a three foot jump, maybe? Then I could walk over to one of the guardhouse towers and sneak out there.”

“You’re insane,” Wilbur says, and Tommy jumps over one of the small puddles. The heels of his boots catch it still, sending water splashing up to the backs of his knees.

“Says the guy currently sneaking out through a barnyard,” Tommy shoots back.

“I’m sure you’re used to the smell of pig,” Wilbur says primly, stepping over the puddle with a look.

“Oh, yeah,” Tommy nods. “Technoblade never leaves me alone.”

Silence. Tommy stiffens, freezing in his spot and dreading turning around. Wilbur’s footsteps have stopped behind him, and he inhales before looking, casting his gaze over his shoulder.

Wilbur is clearly holding in laughter. His cheeks puff out, one hand slapped over his mouth as he stares at Tommy with a wide-eyed expression that betrays his amusement. After a second of eye contact and vivid, tangible relief on Tommy’s end, the prince bends over and practically loses it laughing, coughing on his own lungs as he cackles and wheezes.

“You are cruel,” he says through the gasps, and Tommy laughs with him, loud and long. “Absolutely cruel.”

“Am I wrong?” Tommy asks, poking his own nose with a finger and scrunching it up. “His nose is all— and he smells—”

“Oh my god, stop, stop—” Wilbur says, throwing a hand out and waving it frantically as their giggles subside. “You know,” he says, straightening himself out a bit. “Maybe you’re not as awful as I thought you were, child.”

“You either,” Tommy admits. “I would’ve thought you’d be angry. You’re not, right?” He better check, just to be sure. Sometimes people laugh when they’re angry— Tommy has seen it before.

“No,” Wilbur says. “Some good-natured ribbing is allowed. I would’ve thought you’d be more angry with *me* today, all things honest.”

“You northerners are never honest,” Tommy says, shrugging. “I think I’m too excited to be mad. Although, I am mad. All the time, at everyone. It’s just sometimes it’s— it’s less present, I ‘pose.’”

“Like today?” Wilbur asks. Tommy nods.

“Like today,” he agrees. Wilbur hums, low under his breath, and then a hand on Tommy’s shoulder stops him. He pauses, waiting as Wilbur comes around in front of him, squeezing past the damp stone walls even as the end of the passage comes into view, a wide, bright opening that holds a world’s worth of promises. The prince holds his hand out, palm up and waiting, and after a second of silence Tommy hesitantly puts his own mittened hand into it.

“I,” Wilbur begins, “Crown Prince Wilbur Soot Watson, with the power invested in me, declare this day to be a holiday.”

“A holiday?” Tommy asks, and Wilbur’s fingers close around his own.

“All past transgressions shall be forgiven for today, while outside the palace,” Wilbur says serenely. They both glance down at Wilbur’s hand, and the spot where Tommy’s teeth had dug into his palm not too long ago. “Today is a day for breakfasts in the square and making fun of Technoblade, and flags and dancing and small trinkets from the Ward’s marketplace. Does this sound fair?”

Tommy considers it. He considers being stubborn, refusing to let go. Holding a grudge throughout the day and letting it sour the mood, maybe resulting in Tommy never getting to go outside again. They wouldn’t do that, would they? They’ve been lenient so far, especially Wilbur and the empress, but he’s not sure about Technoblade and Philza just yet. They just seem like they pity him— not like they think of him as a capable human able to make his own decisions. So what will it be? Tommy is tired of being angry. Tired of the constant sadness in his chest, the pointlessness to his own existence.

“Deal,” Tommy says, twisting their hands together to hold them properly, and then shakes. “But I get to lead the way.”

“As long as you let me keep us from getting lost,” Wilbur says, and Tommy tilts his head back and forth as if considering it.

“Mehhh,” he says. “Let’s see. I’m so sick of being in that fucking palace.”

“You and me both,” Wilbur mutters under his breath, but Tommy chooses to ignore him as he presses forward and out the end of the murky stone passage they’ve been following. He has to squint for a minute as the sky opens up above them, and he lifts a hand to his brow as he stumbles out into the street. Thankfully, no one is there to see him nearly trip and fall off the lip of the step, but Wilbur is, and he laughs.

“Shut up,” Tommy says good-naturedly, because they are free. They are in some random fucking street in Raven’s Flight and the general and emperor are nowhere in sight, and he is all alone (save Wilbur, but Wilbur hardly counts, does he?).

He could run. He could. He eyes either side of him— the street they’re in is cobbled, steep drainage ditches on either side of the road and wooden pathways on top of the stone there. Houses and buildings rise above them, stone all the way up to their roofs, which are a medley of thatch and tile and more stone. Multiple chimneys are going, smoke leaking out over the tops and stretching high into the sky like beacons. Tommy traces them back down with his gaze, staring at the glass windows and big iron locks on the doors around them. For the most part, the street is empty; a woman makes her way down the side of the road a bit down the way. It’s quiet, for a city. Lanterns hang here and there, not lit at the moment but clearly used during the night to fill the place with warmth. A hand lands on his shoulder.

“Where are we?” Tommy asks, logically running the idea of bolting through his mind. He doesn’t know where he is. The guards are practically at every corner. Tommy is not dressed like a peasant anymore like he was in Osprey— he sticks out like a sore thumb and he knows it. Running would mean putting a target on his back, and while he had some purpose before, he knows the emperor is just keeping him here out of necessity and kindness, not any kind of political ploy. Tommy is useless now that they’ve surrendered. He’s at their mercy entirely,

and he's not keen on knowing what Philza would say if he ran off right now and came back to the palace as a captive in chains once more.

Probably nothing good. It's better not to risk it. His mind flicks to the broach Dream had returned to him, and he lifts his hand to pass over it once, twice.

Wilbur had mentioned going to a market. Maybe Tommy won't be able to run away completely, but he definitely can get himself lost if he tries.

"Hey," Wilbur says. "You alright?" They've been standing there for a while now, Tommy realizes— a full minute has passed since he stepped out of the passageway. He blinks, turning his head up towards the prince.

"Yeah," he says, letting his hand drop from the broach. "Just... thinking. Where are we?"

"The Fourth Ward," Wilbur begins to explain, guiding him up onto one of the wooden sidewalks as they start to walk, making their way down the road. "So, how much do you know about Raven's Flight?"

Tommy wracks his brain. "Some."

"Okay, well—" Wilbur's face lights up for a moment, and Tommy gets the distinct feeling this is a topic he revels in. "Raven's Flight is a really, really old city. It used to be a citadel, really, only used as a last bastion of the Empire. Very fortified, built up on these huge stone beams and dug into the side of the cliff. Most of the internal fort is gone now, built over by the stronghold palace. But over time, it became more of a settlement than a fort. And they built it up— the bottom layer is the First Ward. There are five, in total. The fifth is the palace and it's grounds, most of the city's government centers, and some guildhouses. The fourth is where most of the affluent neighborhoods are, and the average income of a resident generally goes down for each ward you visit. But they're all very nice. I've been to them all, naturally."

"Sure," Tommy says, keeping his eyes on the houses around them as they round the corner of the first street and step onto the second. "Wards."

"Each ward has its own square and market," he continues, and Tommy nods. This is useful stuff— he should be paying attention, but the sky is above him and it's cloudy. That doesn't mean it's not bright and cold, and his nose is red, so he starts to rub it to fight off the chill. "And there are various ways down from ward to ward. Some houses have basements that stack onto the house below them, especially near the walls. There are staircases, most of them are guarded. We don't regulate movement between wards, but it's good to have guards on duty in case of emergency. The only time I think we regulated people coming and going was... seven years ago? Eight? The last time the Red Cough was at its peak. My father went apeshit trying to keep it in check."

"S practically impossible," Tommy points out, and Wilbur shrugs, the basket jostling a little. "We had the same problem, but without the wards, so."

"Fucking disease," Wilbur says, bitterness like ice in his veins. Tommy blinks, but it passes in a moment. "Well, yeah. So that's the ward system. We'll stay in the Fourth today, because

it's got the market and the square and is the safest. We're nearly there now."

And they are. Tommy can hear it in the distance, the clamor of people and life. Markets are markets, no matter the city— claustrophobic, crowded, and full of salesmen and women. Buyers, too, with pockets full of cash, and between them, skinny street kids with sticky fingers. Tommy thinks in another life he might've been a good pickpocket (he's got the long fingers for it, and the deep, sad eyes). But in this life, he's the one with the cash.

Or, he would be. He notes Wilbur's coin purse with interest, eyeing his belt. The older prince doesn't seem to notice his staring, instead leading Tommy around the corner of the street and into what Tommy can only assume to be the square.

It's big, circular. Cobblestone stretches forth as wagons, carts, and horses circle around the outer rim, the inside reserved for pedestrians. A fountain sits in the middle of the plaza, water gurgling and splashing as it pours from the mouths of a flock of stone birds, dripping into the pool below and leaving dark spots on the rim. Tommy fights the urge to dart forward and stick his fingers into it— the water looks cold, probably pulled in from the mountains that arc high and kiss the sky behind them. People mill around, all of them dressed to a fine degree, and Tommy thinks back to what Wilbur had said. The Fourth Ward, probably home to some of the richest people in the city. The architecture and style definitely give it all away, and based on how Wilbur easily darts between wooden and stone pathways, avoiding carts and people with ease (dragging Tommy along the whole while) he's probably been coming out here since he was a kid. They end up near the fountain, and Tommy pulls his eyes away from a lady in an eye-scorching bright purple jacket in order to look back at the prince. He's perched on the edge of the fountain basin, the wide rim big enough for him to sit on and keep dry despite the splashing. A child races past Tommy and he whirls, following them with his eyes as they dart off with a laugh, chased by another kid probably a couple years older.

"Sit," Wilbur says, setting the basket down on the cold stone. "We've got pastry to eat."

"What kind?" Tommy asks, peering into the basket and squinting. The checkered fabric covering their food is pulled back by Wilbur's gloved hands, and breakfast is served, eaten with chilly stiff fingers surrounded by people.

It's the first time Tommy's felt alive in a while. They sit and people watch as they stuff their faces, Wilbur laughing so hard he chokes when Tommy starts giving the pedestrians around them fake names and lives and stories, pitching his voice high to charade along with their movements and laughing himself when Wilbur joins in, ducking their heads low together and mocking. Bread is soft and tears under Tommy's fingers easily, tossing pieces to the birds that litter the square and, eventually, the few children that creep their way close to the two royals. For a moment, Tommy is violently reminded of Clara, of the children in Hopsfield: thin and starving. These children are nothing like that— they are thin, yes, but clearly well-loved and fed. They've likely never gone to bed hungry. He shares his breakfast anyways, still slightly-warm and steaming in the mid-morning chill.

At some point, the breakfast runs out, and Tommy finds himself dipping bare fingers into the cool water. Coins litter the floor of the pool, and he reaches far enough to dampen the sleeve of his shirt. Wilbur watches him strain to reach the coins, leaning back on his palms and serenely quiet.

“Why are they in there?” Tommy eventually asks, when he’s finally accepted that he won’t be able to reach the money without soaking his entire arm.

“The coins?” Wilbur clarifies. Tommy nods. “What, you’ve never made a wish before?”

“What?” Tommy’s face screws up in confusion, and he stares at him as he wipes his frozen fingers off on his pants. “A wish?”

“You’re joking,” Wilbur says. “You know, the— the wish. You take a coin and flip it into the fountain and make a wish. It’s supposed to come true. I think the city officials take the money every month and use it for the lower wards, honestly, but it’s a fun superstition.”

“What?” Tommy asks again, a breathy little laugh. That sounds silly and stupid. “I’ve never heard of that before.”

“The Isles aren’t ones for wishes, then?” Wilbur asks. Tommy frowns slightly, glancing down at the rippling water and beneath it all, the shimmer of silver and gold.

“No, we are,” he says. “We make them on the stars, though.”

“Techno did say you’ve been enamoured with our star charts,” Wilbur nods. Tommy blinks—he hadn’t thought the general would take notice of something like that. Huh. “Makes sense. Stars are important to you lot.”

“They are,” Tommy says. “Very. We wish on them, and they guide our ships.”

“Navigation.” Wilbur grins. “I know. I’ve read about it.”

“I know more than you,” Tommy is quick to say. “My stars, my rules, bitch.”

“Fair enough,” Wilbur acquiesces, raising his hands in defeat with a grin. “Your stars, your rules.”

“Bitch,” Tommy repeats. He leans back over the water, tipping back and staring at his faint, faint reflection. It’s broken up by waves, and Wilbur starts packing the basket up beside him, folding up the fabric and tucking it away. Eventually he gets up, stretching long arms out in front of him, and Tommy copies the movement, slipping off the edge of the fountain and stretching out. Wilbur grins, and then nods gently towards the other end of the square.

“What do you think?” He asks. “Want to go spend some money?”

“Please,” Tommy says, practically hanging onto Wilbur as they walk. “Give me cash. Give me coin. Give it. I don’t have any money, I am broke, which is to say, I have millions that I cannot access.”

“Oh, shut up,” Wilbur says, pulling his gloves back on. Tommy’s gaze is drawn to the movement for a moment, the thick red scars running down the prince’s fingers, but then he looks back up at him and, stubbornly, inhales. Then exhales.

“That is not going to work on me,” Wilbur says as Tommy sticks his lower lip out, letting his face wobble and expression dull. He forces himself to get a bit paler, mittened grip on Wilbur’s cloak keeping him attached as they walk forward. He lets the cold air dry his eyes out, crocodile tears welling up in their ducts. “Stop it.”

“Give me money,” Tommy whines. “Wilbur, I know you’ve got some, it’s in your bag, I heard it earlier—”

“Oh, piss off,” the older teen says, but he’s reaching underneath his cloak and towards his belt anyways. “If you want something, just tell me and I’ll give it to you, okay?”

“Or,” Tommy says, “you could just give me some money.”

“You’ll spend it all.”

“I will not.”

“Yes, you will.”

They bicker back and forth, as the cobbles of the squares fall away and the houses start to press in closer to the street, and stalls made of wood and stone start to pop up. Colorful cloth lines the street, huge tapestries and fabric shops and food stalls with awnings that stretch over nearly the whole street. He can hardly see the sky anymore, and clutching onto Wilbur becomes less of a purposeful attempt to be a hassle and more of a necessity as the crowd becomes thick with people pressing in on them from every side. Shopkeepers shout and cry, and the signs read prices in Northal first, then Common. Some are just open for barter— most are set prices with the Continental currency.

“See anything you like?” Wilbur asks, because Tommy’s gone quiet and his eyes are wide as he tries to take it all in. In Caterwaul, the markets had been similar (albeit in a different language, and warmer colors). But they’d been just as busy the few times he’d been allowed into one, and there were more fisheries than Tommy can see here. The markets in Caterwaul had smelled, the stink of fish rising up above the sweaty crowds. Here, the only smells he can parse are some sort of meat cooking, fat popping and sizzling. Occasionally, a spice or two floats his way, or the cold fresh scent of something minty.

“I—” He’s overwhelmed. Wilbur frowns for a moment down at him, and then whisks them both to the side of the street. It’s only a tad quieter here, but it’s better. Tommy takes a breath.

“We can go, if you like,” Wilbur offers, and Tommy shakes his head. No fucking way— he just needs a moment to catch his breath. They stand there for a second, Tommy’s hands fisted in the fine wool of his cloak, and he takes a few careful, counted breaths until his chest feels less tight and the light of the day no longer hurts his eyes. He glances around again, eyes catching on a stand across the way. A man stands behind a temporary wooden counter, handing over a brightly-colored cone of something to a child, who passes over a coin in return and then darts away. Above him, Wilbur’s hand lands on his head, fingers sinking into his hair for a moment.

“Here,” he says, nudging the top of his head forward and then his whole body. They cross the street of the market, dodging pedestrians and small carts in order to end up at the man’s stall.

“Hello!” he cries, a mustache covering his top lip entirely. He grins, voice booming and loud. “What flavor!”

“What is this?” Tommy asks, getting on his tiptoes to peer over the counter.

“Ice!” He says, grinning down at Tommy and booming out his explanation. “Flavored ice!”

“Do you have any preference?” Wilbur asks, ducking his head to peer at Tommy. “There’s different berries, mostly. Blueberry, raspberry, melon, grape.”

“Blueberry?” Tommy tips his head, glancing back at him. “How do they make it blueberry?”

“Like this!” The man says, and then turns back to his cart with a grin and a showy flip of his scoop. In a practiced manner, his hands flip and churn the ice below him, shaving it off into chunks as Tommy watches in slight awe. They’d never really had stuff like this down in the Isles— storing ice was difficult with the heat, and transportation of ice was even *moreso*. With the war, they’d hardly had any for the past few years. The man scoops the ice into a small paper cone, shaping it into a ball, and then he sets his spoon down in favor of picking up a glass bottle. He pours the shimmering blue liquid inside over the ball of ice and hands it over to Tommy with a grin, one that he can’t match as he stares at it. Wilbur is watching him with a smile, and when Tommy looks up at him (one hand still firmly grasping the older boy’s cloak) he nods.

“Try it,” he says. Tommy eyes the ice suspiciously, especially now that it’s *blue* , but after a second he leans and licks it.

It’s sweet. He wasn’t expecting it to be sweet, honestly. The blue sticks to his tongue like the taffy did, but the ice is shockingly cold, crunching between his teeth as it comes away in his mouth. It doesn’t taste like blueberries, really. It’s just sweet. Sweet and crunchy. Wilbur is chatting with the man, who starts making another cone, this time with red syrup. He passes over a few coins in return for it, and the man gives a small wave to Tommy as Wilbur gently puts an arm over his shoulders and nudges him away.

“What do you think?” Wilbur asks as they continue walking, Tommy occasionally taking a bite of the sweet blue. He’s not sure what to think, honestly.

“I don’t know,” he says, glancing over at Wilbur’s red cone. Hm. It looks just like his, but red. He wonders what flavor it is— raspberry, maybe? How did the man even get raspberries? Tommy decides to try something, looking at the way he’s still clinging onto Wilbur and how the prince hasn’t complained, not once. “Let me try yours.”

“What?” Wilbur laughs, shaking his head. “No, you got that one. I’m not sharing.”

“Let me try,” Tommy insists, tugging on his cloak. “Let me try, Wilbur, let me— I want to see if I like it better. It’s not fair, I’ve never had this before and you have so let me try!”



“You sound like a fucking toddler,” Wilbur complains, holding his cone upwards to where Tommy can’t quite reach. “Eat your blue.”

“It’s not even *blueberry*,” Tommy complains. “It’s just *sweet*.”

“That’s the point,” Wilbur says. “It’s sweet. I can’t believe I’m giving you sugar this early in the morning.”

“It’s got to be at least noon,” Tommy counters. “I’m practically day-drinking.”

“You are *not*,” Wilbur says with a choked laugh, bringing his cone back down. Tommy eyes it. “Stop being a brat, come on. Look around, tell me if there’s anything you want. We’re not going to stick around much longer.”

“What?” Tommy scowls. “Scared you’re going to get us in trouble?”

“Oh, we already are,” Wilbur says faintly, pausing for a moment at a small jewelry stall and picking up a set of earrings. Tommy glances— it’s all shiny fodder, shit that reminds him of being paraded in front of a court. But Wilbur turns, holding the silver up to his ears with one hand and hums. “Your ears are pierced, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “But I don’t want those.”

“No, but I do,” Wilbur tells him, shuffling them both to the side more and setting down the earrings in favor of picking up another pair, holding them up to Tommy’s face. “If you’re going to be hanging out with me, you need to look nice.”

“I’m not your doll,” Tommy complains, swiping at Wilbur’s hand and knocking his fingers away. He takes another bite of his sweet ice, watching with narrowed eyes as Wilbur sets those earrings down too.

“Sure,” Wilbur says, and then snags some more silver. A necklace this time, pushed towards Tommy’s chest. “With how my father dismissed you into my care, you were practically a birthday present.”

“Shut the *fuck* up,” Tommy hisses, humiliation burning through his veins as the shopkeeper very clearly listens in on their conversation.

“We’ll get these,” Wilbur says, ignoring him as Tommy tugs insistently on his cloak, anger rising up in him. He pushes the earrings forward, the second pair, and then the necklace too. He glances back at Tommy, who resists the urge to stomp his foot.

“I fucking hate you,” he says, any vague fondness from earlier dissipating like dew in the early morning sun. “What the fuck is *wrong* with you?”

“Oh, shush,” Wilbur says, and it’s layered over with a strange sort of sweetness. The same kind of sweet that the man put on his ice, sticky and blue and the kind that coats your throat. He swings one arm up and over Tommy’s shoulders, pulling him closer like he had this morning with the matron but this time, Tommy isn’t compliant. He wriggles like a fish, desperate to escape the snare. “Let me treat you, alright?” Wilbur says as he hands over some

coin, as the shop lady puts the silver into boxes and packages it carefully for Wilbur to put in their basket. “You got here with practically nothing. Wear them or don’t– I don’t care. But they’re yours now, okay? Something to belong to you and you alone. You don’t have much of that here.”

Tommy stops wiggling in order to process, staring up at the prince and swaying slightly on his feet. The ice in his cone is melting some, the paper staining blue. He can’t find it in himself to care, not when Wilbur is saying shit like that in that saccharine tone. He sounds like he’s trying to placate a rowdy kitten.

“Besides,” Wilbur says, and one of his hands comes up to pat at Tommy’s chest, the pin that sits proudly on his breast. “You wear the brooch Mum gave you practically every day. What am I to assume?”

“Fuck off,” Tommy says, ducking his head. Wilbur has no idea what he’s talking about, after all. The emerald means so much more now, something so different than whatever Wilbur thinks he’s talking about. Wilbur is a right fucking prick, Tommy decides. A right fucking prick with money to spend, and if he’s going to spend it on Tommy then he may as well spend it on shit he actually likes. So he shuts his mouth and glares at the lady as she hands over the boxes for Wilbur to put away, and then turns around to look over both their shoulders at the stalls around. “I won’t let you buy me out,” he says, eyes scanning the shops for anything he might want. “Not happening. I’m too tough for that. Your money can’t buy me shit, bitch.”

“I don’t want to buy your loyalty, Tommy,” Wilbur says with a soft sigh, raising a hand in goodbye to the shop lady as they move on. Tommy glares at the basket and the offending articles of jewelry inside, and then pointedly looks at Wilbur. Wilbur shakes his head. “That’s not loyalty. That’s some bits of metals with gemstones in them. They weren’t even expensive.” It’s not like Tommy had looked at the price, sure, but aren’t most pretty shiny things expensive? He still glares, and Wilbur huffs, drawing his arm over Tommy’s shoulder. “It’s just so you can have something to call your own. A bid for control.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Tommy says, and then raises one arm to point vaguely toward a section of stalls they hadn’t gone towards yet. “That way.”

“See something?” Wilbur asks, and Tommy shakes his head. Not yet, he hasn’t, but he plans on finding the singular most expensive thing he can in order to piss Wilbur off, or push boundaries. He wonders what it’ll take to get Wilbur properly mad again. Probably talking about Philza. That worked last time.

They wander, flitting from shop to shop as Tommy inspects every little thing. He turns over statuettes, gets his fingers all over the soft dolls and toys at a woodcarver’s stall, stubbornly ignoring Wilbur’s teasing look. And if he lingers at the sight of a carved wooden cow, well. No one has to know. (He doesn’t stop Wilbur this time, as the older boy holds him back for a moment and buys the stupid little thing. He doesn’t even complain, which Wilbur must take as a win based on the grin plastered all over his *stupid* face.) Eventually, they start running out of places to go. The last one Wilbur insists on going to is a music shop. This one is an actual storefront, not just a marketplace stall, and he chatters as they enter.

“It’s one of the top producers of instruments in the Empire,” Wilbur says, Tommy trying to block out his self-righteous voice and looking around. The whole place is filled head to toe with instruments— pianos, guitars on the walls, other strings ranging from tiny violas meant for children to giant basses. More woodwinds are farther back, and Wilbur beelines for the counter. “Best quality on the continent, I’d say. I get all my things from here. The palace puts in special orders. Hello!”

“Hallo!” someone shouts back, and then out from behind the back door comes a young woman. She’s got the reddest hair Tommy has ever seen, an apron tied around her waist, sleeves pushed up to her elbows. She’s covered in a fine layer of sawdust. When she catches sight of Wilbur she pauses for a moment, and then frantically starts brushing herself off. “Oh, Your Highness, I didn’t even— your voice, I didn’t even recognize it.”

“Please, Sal,” Wilbur says, a grin threatening to swallow the older teen’s face whole. He leans on the counter with his elbows, handing the basket off to Tommy. “It’s Wilbur. I’m just here for a few replacement strings.”

“Snapped the ones I gave you already?” the woman asks, a smile of similar caliber on her lips as she watches Wilbur. Tommy frowns— glancing between them with a growing suspicion.

“You know me,” Wilbur says. “I’m very enthusiastic.”

“Oh, I know,” she says, and then it hits Tommy.

“You’re flirting,” he says out loud, voice booming compared to the relatively low tones the two had been speaking in before. He slaps his own hand over his mouth the minute he realizes he said that aloud, the wool fluff of his mittens getting in between his lips and sticking. Wilbur has whipped his head around and is— well, he’s not glaring at Tommy, but his cheeks and ears are red and so are the woman’s, one of her hands stuttering along the counter.

“And who is this?” She asks, smiling tightly. Tommy glares, still with a hand over his mouth.

“This is—” Wilbur pauses, then sighs. “This is the former King Thomas of the Opus Isles.”

Sally’s mouth drops open, and Tommy fights the urge to crawl under the counter and bite her fucking ankles. “Oh,” she says, and then, “oh. Well. It is very nice to meet you, Thomas.”

“You don’t have to lie,” Tommy says, lowering his hand just the slightest from his mouth. “It’s okay.”

“Why would I lie?” Sally asks, staring at him. Her face is still flushed red, pairing nicely with the shade of her hair. She’s got a soft-looking face, a good nose, small ears. Even coated in dust she looks nice. Tommy can understand why Wilbur wants to flirt with her. “It *is* very nice to meet you. I’m not too used to hanging around in the company of royals, however, so please excuse anything ignorant I say.”

“Now you’re lying,” Wilbur says. He turns to Tommy, rubbing a knuckle against his own chin as he does. “Sally here plays for us in the palace sometimes. She’s inheriting the

business as well, so she's the one who comes and does all the upkeep for us too. She hangs around royalty plenty."

"Ew," Tommy says, and Wilbur splutters.

"Not like that!"

"Well then, I won't worry," Sally says, brushing off the comment and leaning on the counter, smiling at Tommy. "Your Highness, do you play?"

He's less inclined to answer, a sudden burst of shyness flooding his system. If he was home, he'd tuck himself beneath Dream's arm, hiding away from the world and the people that frightened him. Here, all he has is Wilbur, and he is not keen to be under his elbow again. So he raises his head high, shoving back the wave of anxiety in his chest, and nods. "Yeah," he says. "A bunch. Piano is what I'm best at, though."

"Piano is a good, solid skill," Sally says, nodding a bit. "Would you like to try the grand we've got on display?" Tommy looks back, eyeing the piano in the center of the display room with interest. He recognizes the craftsmanship a little bit—there are only a few really well-known music peddlers on the Continent, and the Salmon line has been around for centuries at this point. He recognizes this girl now, and her father too, because they've likely shipped down to the Isles at some point. He takes a step toward the piano before stopping, glancing back.

"You're sure?" he asks. Sally smiles.

"He does leave fingerprints," Wilbur faux-whispers, and Tommy lashes out with a foot and kicks him in the shin. "Ow!"

"It's okay," Sally says. "Give us a song, Thomas."

"Tommy," he corrects absently, setting the basket down by the seat of the piano and sliding on, tugging off his mittens. The keys are familiar but cold under his fingertips, smooth ivory and cool wood. He plays a scale—short and simple, easy. He never liked being tutored in piano. It had felt suffocating, being forced to play scales for ages and then practice songs he didn't care about. He'd much rather bang around on the keys until he found something that sounded nice, something that made him bob his head and sing off-key words that didn't make any sense. Dream had hated that, though, so he'd kept that hobby to himself.

Here, though, he can do whatever he wants. He's sure Sally won't get mad—musicians are never the type. Wilbur might be peeved, but he doesn't care about what Wilbur thinks, so he goes for something in the middle.

It's an old folk tune from the Isles, something quiet and soft but meant to be sung while working in a tannery, the gore and stench of animal skins rising around you. Feet stomping, scraping stones to soften the hide, slapping the leather around to give it that elasticity. The song is irrelevant—Tommy only knows some of the lyrics, sung in Sindan, little things about bringing home money to little girls and wives and how the smell clings and—

It's a song that can go on forever, so after a few rounds of the chorus, Tommy draws it to a close. Behind him, two sets of hands give him a round of scattered applause, and Tommy feels his cheeks burn.

"That was lovely," Sally says, smiling wide. She's still behind the counter, and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear as she watches him with the greenest eyes Tommy's ever seen.

"Absolutely lovely. You've got talent, your Grace!"

"Tommy," he corrects again, hunching his shoulders in. "Thank you."

"It was very nice," Wilbur says, ducking his head. "Hm. Maybe we should get you a piano for your room."

"It's okay," Tommy says, slipping off the bench and pulling his mittens back on. His fingers are warm and loose, and his chest is buzzing. He's getting tired. "I'm not *that* good."

"Music isn't about being good," Sally says, tipping her head. "It's about enjoying the act of creation."

"You would know," Wilbur teases gently, and she reaches out to slap his arm, laughing bright and loud. Tommy watches, narrowing his eyes just slightly. He wonders if Philza knows.

"Thank you for the song, Tommy," Sally says again, and then turns her eyes to Wilbur. "What were you two stopping by for, then? Not a piano— you can't carry that in your basket."

"I need strings, Sal," Wilbur reminds her, and she snaps, tapping her temple and ducking under the counter in a flurry of red frizzy hair and fabric. Tommy picks up said basket, wobbling his way to Wilbur's side and he *doesn't* lean up against Wilbur first. He doesn't. Wilbur initiates the contact, leaning over just enough for Tommy's head to fall against his elbow. He hasn't had this much excitement or exercise in weeks, okay? He's getting tired.

"Which ones?" Sally asks, voice muffled as she's under the counter digging for something.

"E and A," Wilbur calls out, and Tommy shuts his eyes as they wait for Sally to pack up the strings. Their voices chatter over his head, unimportant shit, mostly about the weather and trade transports. Tommy doesn't want to think about trade right now, much less the fact that it's coming from his country. All that does is remind him of the barrels of food rotting away somewhere in the Isles' countryside, and he does not want to think about that.

"Thanks, Sally," Wilbur says after a few minutes, sliding some coins across the table.

"There's some extra there. If the guards come, you didn't see us."

"Snuck out again?" Sally laughs, and Wilbur tucks the package of guitar strings into their basket, Tommy opening his eyes disgruntled as Wilbur jostles them both. He meets Sally's gaze, and she smiles. "I won't tell. It was very nice to meet you, Your Highness."

"Tommy," he grumbles, and tips his head into Wilbur's arm further. The older prince just sighs, and lifts a hand in farewell.

"Bye, Miss Salmon," he says, and Sally snorts, waving them both off.

“Goodbye,” she says. “Pleasure to have your business!”

“You’ll never lose it!” Wilbur calls back, and a bell rings as he opens the door and shuffles them both outside. Tommy blinks— something is different, but he can’t place it just yet. Wilbur takes the basket from his hands and slings his arm through it, patting Tommy’s shoulder as the young king processes.

Stuff is... falling from the sky. Not rain. No, rain makes puddles and mud and leaves you damp and cold, unless it’s a summer storm, and then you’re just damp and hot. This is not rain. It’s white and sticks to the ground and the shop stalls around them, falling from the grey clouds above like the ice in the man’s machine earlier. But different. It looks more... fluffy. Wilbur hums and Tommy holds a hand out, watching in mild awe as the snow lands on his dark mittens and sticks there a minute before melting.

“I didn’t think it was going to start so soon,” Wilbur says. He glances down, and pauses. “... Is this your first time seeing snow?”

“Real snow, yeah,” Tommy says, tipping his head up and blinking as the flakes coat his eyelashes, cold pinpricks all over his face. “Woah.”

“Wait until the storms come,” Wilbur says, voice weirdly gentle. “They last for days.”

“Freaky,” Tommy mutters, stepping out into the street and staring up into the sky still. Wilbur steps up behind him, and Tommy glances back, opening his mouth to ask how exactly, does snow work—

But he freezes.

There’s a man in armor behind Wilbur.

“Your Highness,” he says, a gruff voice with exasperation clearly written in his tone. Wilbur turns to look, while Tommy turns ready to bolt, heart jackrabbiting in his chest and about to duck and weave and dodge those flying hands in order to avoid getting hit— but then Wilbur’s hand is on his shoulder and his face is in Tommy’s, a grin plastered across it. He looks disappointed, but not scared. Tommy thinks he should feel scared. Otherwise there’s no reason for Tommy to be so frightened. He’d just been jumpscared— he’s fine. He’s fine. Wilbur shrugs.

“Welp,” he says, “party’s over. We got some wonderful spoils, though.”

“Your father is furious,” the guardsman says, voice still low. Tommy can hear the clanking of armor as the rest of his party rounds the corner, people parting before them as they come up behind the first. All of their armor glints with dampness, the snow getting heavier and heavier as it falls. Great. Now they have an audience. “We’ll escort you back up to the palace.”

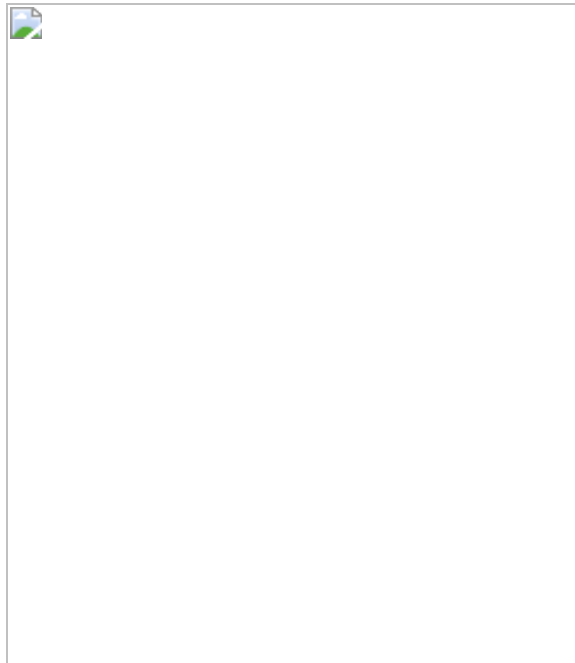
“Fine by me,” Wilbur says, crumpling the remains of the sweet ice cone in his hand and tossing it into the basket. “I’m finished. Toms, are you?”

Tommy blinks, and then turns his gaze up to the guards. They seem impassive, not hostile, but he knows better than to argue. Wilbur's hand turns into an arm, seemingly sensing his discomfort and drawing him into his side again. Tommy's finding he quite likes it under there, tucked up close to Wilbur and pressed beneath his cloak as a final layer of warmth against the chill. He likes being able to hear Wilbur's heartbeat against his side, likes the fact that he feels somewhat safe and hidden. He ducks his head— *he's not shy* , he's not, he's just unsure about the guards and their position regarding him— and nods.

“Sure,” he says. “I’m done.”

“Then home we go,” Wilbur says, as though they have any choice in the matter. Tommy stays by his side as the guard turns and surrounds them both, a wall of gleaming metal between them and any onlookers. He raises his head once to glance out at them, notice how they whisper to each other— at one point on the walk upwards, he thinks he catches sight of blond hair, dashing through the crowds and following their small procession. He gets on his toes, nudging past Wilbur and ducking his head to try and see— but they come into view, and it's just a young boy in a purple cloak that matches bright violet eyes, white specks dotting his shoulders and sticking in his hair. They lock gazes for a second, Tommy guessing he's about the same age as the kid, and then armor shuffles and blocks his view of him.

He turns away as Wilbur questions him, his voice bouncing off his ears and fuzzy in his brain. He shakes his head, muttering some stupid excuse, and puts the image of the kid out of his mind as they walk back up to the palace, dread sinking low in Tommy's heart.



BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

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sally :D sally ! sally!

little king tommy is finally let outside, what havoc will he wreak? not much, he's too stressed out apparently.

i'm a big fan of sea shanties and the opus isles is like. the perfect opportunity to use them bc it's a trading kingdom. this world is so special to me so i hope it shines through in the worldbuilding! especially this chapter- raven's flight is a lot like minas tirith, if you've seen LOTR !

reminder to kudos and comment if ur enjoying :) i feel very pretentious writing this story but it really is my baby and so much work has gone into it so ;-; i just love talking about it and stuff.

in fact, u can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)



## arc III. - love'll get you slaughtered

### Chapter Summary

tw: n/a

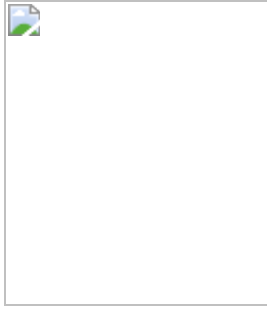
this chapter was beta'd by the lovely TJ/definitelynotshouting!!!!

### Chapter Notes

o/ hey! before we get into it, i'm making an executive decision that after chapter 13, there's gonna be a week break where i don't post :) i have finals and need to recuperate, and also try and backlog a couple chapters which will be my main goal during that break haha. just a heads up!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)





“How *could* you?”

Philza is, understandably, furious.

He stands in front of them, arms crossed, anger written plain across his face. They’re in his study, the fire flickering warm across the floor. Tommy and Wilbur are sitting– Philza clasps his hands behind his back as he paces the floor behind his desk. He looks frazzled, stressed.

“The whole palace was searching,” he continues, throwing a hand into the air. This isn’t the first time he’s made this point. “I had guards out in the ward, combing every inch of the gardens, the kitchens, the palace, the chapel, everything. And you were out fucking gallavanti in the market. Wilbur, how could you?”

“Nothing went wrong,” Wilbur cuts in. It’s also not the first time he’s said this. Tommy shrinks back in his seat, wringing his hands over and over in his lap. He knows Wilbur said he’d take the blame and so far he *has*, but Tommy also doesn’t trust the prince as far as he can throw him. One wrong word from Philza and he’s sure Wilbur will turn on him, and then the blame will be pinned to him and he’ll be in *so* much trouble. Tommy is used to trouble. But he’s uncertain as to what their punishment will be and that is more terrifying than anything else. “Tommy and I just went shopping. We were fine. We weren’t even going to leave the Fourth Ward.”

“Tommy isn’t supposed to leave the palace,” Philza snaps, whirling around. “You directly disobeyed my orders, Wil.”

“And?” Wilbur shrugs. “Not the first time.”

“He could’ve bolted,” Philza insists, nodding towards Tommy (who immediately stiffens, but doesn’t rise to it). “Thomas could’ve run, or someone would have realized who you two were and gotten angry, or any number of things. This was so irresponsible, I am so– *Prime*, Wil!” Philza huffs out another irritated breath, slamming his hands down on his desk for a moment. Tommy flinches– the emperor glances up through his messy bangs, and Tommy can see the internal war happening on his face as he tries to calm down. He raises a hand and drags it down his face, shoulders slumping. “What am I going to do with you?” he asks quietly, and Tommy drags his feet up from the floor and pulls his knees to his chest.

“Dad,” Wilbur says. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Philza blinks his eyes open once more, and his gaze lands on Tommy. He tries to hold his head up, fingers anxiously crumpling the fabric of his pants.

“But,” Wilbur says. “Look. Nothing went wrong. Tommy and I are fine. In fact, he didn’t even want to run off. We got stuff, we saw— we did stuff. It was *fine* . Don’t you think it might’ve been good for us? It’s safe, especially where we were. Maybe, if we keep going on outings, by the time spring rolls around Tommy can come with us to—”

“No.” The answer is firm and immediate. Tommy is keeping his mouth shut, so as not to lose precious freedoms, but he still jerks his head at this line of conversation. Come with them where? Why is Philza so against it? In fact, the man is still fuming, ears and cheeks red with rage. “Absolutely not.”

“You’re not even considering it,” Wilbur hisses. “Dad—”

“I said no, Wilbur. That is final.” Philza slams a hand down on the desk and Tommy flinches again, drawing his legs up under the chair and finally putting his voice to good use.

“It’s my fault too,” he says, even though he’s screaming at himself not to give up this bit of happiness he’s found inside this city’s walls. “I went along.”

“Not a word,” Philza says, and Tommy flinches a third time. “Not a word from you. Prime, Wilbur— just—”

“What is wrong with you?” Wilbur snaps, leaning forward in his chair with a rage so tangible it spills from his mouth and across the floor like blood. Tommy is shrinking back before Wilbur even gets up, pushing the papers on Philza’s desk aside as he plants his own fists down on the wood and glares across at his father. “Ever since— ever since this fucking war started, you’ve been awful. What is *wrong* with you? Did something happen? Is it the fighting? Why are you being so cruel? Not just to Tommy, but to me, too. You’re avoiding me. I’ve been going through Mum this entire time just to get things to do. It’s like you don’t want me to help, or stick my nose in places where it rightfully belongs. Tommy’s been a fun pet project, believe me, he has, but for *fuck’s* sake Dad, I’m the crown prince. Treat me like it, or I just might walk out.”

“You cannot walk out on your birthright,” Philza says. Tommy has the sudden feeling that this is turning into a conversation he is not meant to hear.

“It is easier than you think to disappear,” Wilbur retorts through gritted teeth. Philza stares at him, a brief widening of his eyes betraying his surprise, and then a second later they narrow once more. His lips turn up into a scowl and he slams his fists on the desk (they really are father and son), sending papers scattering around and fluttering to the floor. Tommy’s chest is so, so tight. Wilbur stands there in the center of the hurricane, chest heaving as he stares at his father with fury plain across his face. They are both red, so similar and yet not. Two different coins entirely.

“Get out,” Philza says. It’s curt, and Wilbur turns on his heel without a second glance. Tommy lowers his knees from his chest— when had he pulled them up protectively like that in the first place?— and Philza’s eyes turn to him. They soften only slightly, and Tommy’s quick to scramble to his feet and make his retreat out of the room. Philza tries to say something as he goes— a plea, it sounds like, or his name but he ignores him, rushing out the door after Wilbur. The hallway is not empty— General Technoblade leans against one of the walls, arms

crossed and hair draped low over the side of his face. From Tommy's angle, he cannot make out his expression. But it doesn't matter. He doesn't even hesitate to throw himself after Wilbur.

"Wilbur," he calls out, voice high-pitched and frantic in the quiet of the hall. Behind them, the door booms shut. He's not sure what he wants to say— an apology, maybe? "Wilbur—"

"Shut *up*," the prince hisses, whirling around on Tommy in a moment of surprise. Tommy flinches backwards, fingers dropping from where they'd been outstretched towards him. "Can't you read the room and leave me alone right now? Or must you always follow me like a sodden kitten I found and fed in the street? *Piss off*, you little freakshow."

"You don't mean that," Tommy says stubbornly. He knows Wilbur doesn't— he knows Wilbur doesn't like him, yes, that much is true, but Tommy also knows that Wilbur is more prone to tolerating him than anyone else in this damn palace. "If you're mad at Philza then be mad at him, not me—"

"Don't you know when to quit it?" Wilbur shouts. His voice echoes, and Tommy blinks. "I said *leave me alone* !"

It's such a stark contrast from their happy morning that Tommy is struck dumb. He stands there in the center of the hallway as Wilbur turns once more, stomping down the hallway and disappearing around the corner with a rain cloud stuck fast over his head. Tommy drops his hands to his middle, wringing his fingers over themselves.

"He gets it from his mother," someone says, and Tommy jumps. When he turns, Technoblade is looking at him, still leaning against the wall.

"What?"

Technoblade nods down the hall in the direction Wilbur had gone. "The ability to say scathing things he doesn't mean," he says. "You should hear it when Phil and Kristin have a row. Actually, I pray you never do. It's a sight to behold, but they never mean it, in the end." Technoblade is still looking down the hall, lips pressed tightly together. "Better not speak on it at all," he amends after a moment, eyes glittering as he turns them back to Tommy. "Go on, now. Lick your wounds, come back swinging."

"Is that your philosophy?" Tommy asks, looking back down the hall. Behind them, the door to Philza's study is still and quiet. "Scream at each other and never apologize?"

At least Dream had apologized.

Technoblade sighs. "I never said they don't apologize," he says, then shakes his head again with a wry smile. "Go to your room," he suggests. It's not a command, but it's firm. "You've had your day."

"Fuck off," Tommy murmurs.

“You’re getting it,” Technoblade says. Tommy scowls in his direction. “I don’t expect you to apologize, it’s fine. Go.” He lifts a hand and flicks his fingers, laden with silver rings. Tommy’s eyes catch on the way they glint, and then he turns, shoving his hands into his pockets and letting his shoulders slouch.

His bedroom is now the most boring place in the world. He’s seen a glimpse of Raven’s Flight, the city proper, and now Tommy’s infatuated. For a while he sits on his windowsill and cracks it open as far as he can, sticking his hand out into the falling snow and licking the cold drops of water from his fingers. It’s a novelty, one he’d barely gotten to experience in the streets, and he watches as the snow litters the sill and gathers there in small white piles. He messes around in it for a bit, clumping the snow together until it’s wet slush against the stone, and his fingers are stiff and red with the cold. His nose runs, the fire lit in his bedroom hearth doing little to stave off the chill until he sits just beside it and holds his hands out over the flames.

He doesn’t even have that many books decorating his shelves. Tommy stares sourly at the things they’d bought earlier in the day that now sit on his dresser, and after a few minutes of internal debate, holds the silver earrings up to his face.

The silver washes his skin out, contrasts the gold of his hair and makes him look pale.

“I am in need of some mischief,” Tommy says out loud to himself, staring at the mirror and glaring. There’s been plenty of mischief already today, but he throws the earrings down against the wood of the dresser and feels an itch in his fingertips for trouble.

Not anything terrible. Just something sneaky, and perhaps malicious. There is the problem of the guards in front of his door, of course, and the fact they’ve been doubled since this morning, but that’s something Tommy can work around easily.

He brings one hand up, rubbing a thumb absently along the edges of the broach still pinned to his chest, and thinks. There’s not much to do in this palace, other than the things he’s been doing. Plus, Philza is pissed at him already. It won’t do to make more of a mess for himself. Tommy scowls at the door, pretending it’s Wilbur, or maybe the emperor. That would be nice, getting to scowl at either of them and not get shit for it. Tommy sinks to the floor and picks at the stone, still scowling.

He can’t go anywhere. He can’t do anything. He’s *trapped*, again. This is worse than the chains they’d kept him in during the ride north. Those had been symbolic more than anything— a testament to his loss. This boredom, this scolding, this cruelty: this is the clipping of wings. Tommy is a songbird and he is being fucking stifled. A gilded cage is still a cage. No matter how much they try to sugarcoat it and spoil him, Tommy is a prisoner first and foremost. Today has just proved it. He can’t even go out for a stroll without getting yelled at.

Miserably, he turns, staring out at the snow and the white-capped mountains beyond his windowsill. He feels like a toddler throwing a tantrum, sitting here on the floor and fisting his hands in the rug. He’d gotten scolded like one, too.

Tommy can't risk going out and making more mischief, despite what he wants. So he sits, staring as fat snowflakes fall from the sky, and stubbornly holds back tears.

He can't sleep that night.

Tommy's not sure if it's the anxiety from afternoon seeping in or the thrill of the morning. All he can see when he closes his eyes are the city streets, the glimmering coins warped by water in the fountain. He can see Wilbur smiling, crumbs of their breakfast still stuck to his stupid face as they laughed together over something dumb. He'd had so much fun. And now he is so fucking sad.

Tommy eventually drags himself out of bed. The snow has stopped— the night sky isn't clear, though, and he can't spot any stars no matter how far he tilts his head out the window into the cool night air. It nips his nose and makes him shiver, but he still leans out.

It is a very far drop, he thinks, looking down at the craggy cliff sides below. Perhaps it would only hurt a moment—

He pulls back, bare feet chilly against the stone as he pulls in the windows and latches them tightly. Tommy draws the curtains closed firmly, staring at their shuffling forms in the candlelight from the lamp beside his bed. After a moment, he quietly shoves his feet into a pair of warm, fur-lined slippers, digging through his wardrobe in order to find the warmest cloak he can. It's large— large enough that it was likely Wilbur's. Stolen from the prince's own enormous closet in order to give Tommy something blue to wear. He runs his fingers over the fine embroidery around the edges and then slips it on, pushing his arms through the slits in the front. He tucks one hand into the cloak, the other staying out as he picks up the lantern he keeps beside his bed. The fire still flickers in his hearth, low, and Tommy creeps past it to the door.

The handle isn't locked. Of course it isn't— for some reason, the emperor is keen on pretending like Tommy isn't a prisoner. What a fucking liar. Tommy turns the handle gently, making as little noise as possible as he opens the door and steps into the hall. He knows there are guards assigned to his room every hour of the day— he's expecting them to hound him the moment he makes his way out into the hall, hands on his shoulders and stern faces creeping around into his vision.

Nothing comes. No hands, no stern words. Tommy blinks, and turns.

He is not alone— there *is* a guard. But the guard is standing next to his door leaning against the wall, hand wrapped loosely around the pommel of their sword. Underneath the Empire-standard helmet, Tommy can just make out their face. Their eyes are closed, lips slightly open and breath coming long and slow. Disbelief rises in him for a moment, but it's quickly smothered by pure excitement.

His guard is fucking asleep on the job. If Tommy is quiet (and he is good at being quiet) he can go *anywhere* with no eyes on him.

After a second of pure astonishment, Tommy gently makes his way down the hall. With his padded slippers it's not hard to stay silent, and the creak of the lantern in his hand is soft enough to go unnoticed. The guard doesn't awaken as Tommy tiptoes past and down the hall, turning the corner before he lets himself relax. Only then do his shoulders untense, hands loosening some and breath coming a little quicker. He takes a few more steps down the hall and then allows himself a tiny, breathy laugh.

*Asleep* . On the job. Tommy's palace guard would have never. What fucking idiots!

The lantern in his hand casts long shadows on the walls, the normal daytime lights turned down low for the evening. His own shadow is dark and numerous, spread out across the floor and rugs as he pads his way through the dark stone and chilly halls. Turn after turn, he finds himself beaming as he makes his way through the maze of the stronghold. Tommy's alone. For the first time in years, he has no eyes on him. No people watching, no guards tracking his movements. For all they know, he is tucked into his own bed sound asleep like they are. He's sure the emperor and empress are asleep. Wilbur too, most likely, although hadn't the prince mentioned he was a night owl at some point? It doesn't matter. Tommy is alone and he's free to go anywhere in the palace. He doesn't plan on getting caught. In fact, he plans on keeping this nighttime outing entirely to himself. A secret, just for him.

He dances to inaudible music as he makes his way down, down, deeper into the stronghold. Maybe someone like the emperor or general would think he'd try and escape— no way. He knows he can't make it past the gates and then through Raven's Flight. He's bold enough to try, sure, but the sheer surprise of being able to do this is enough. Maybe another night he'll try and leave, but for now he has a different plan.

He draws up memories of this morning, remembering the twists and turns and echoes of Wilbur's laughter in the hallways as he explained their plan for the day. Down, through the stones, through the evil, and into the belly of the beast.

The kitchens.

Tommy loved sneaking into the kitchens back in Caterwaul. He knew every inch of them. Where the sweets were kept, where the cooks kept the dried fruits and meats. He knew how to work the stoves too, despite Dream's insistence he doesn't touch them, and is perfectly capable of warming up a hot cup of honey milk for himself. The kitchens here in Raven's Flight are just another color of kitchen— same purpose, different design. Tommy can figure it out. He makes his way down this labyrinth of hallways and finally, finds himself at the doors to the kitchen. This is only partly because he followed his nose— without the smell of food and warmth of the halls increasing as he got closer, he might've lost his way once or twice. And every time Tommy sees a guard or a servant he's quick to hide, shoving himself behind tapestries or into doorways, waiting with bated breath until he's alone again.

It's thrilling. His blood is singing in his veins as he pushes the door open to the kitchens and, blissfully, they are quiet. It's far too late now for any servant to be eating their supper, and the place has been swept and the lights turned dim for now. Tommy scans over the dark shapes of the tables with a keen eye until he finds the stoves and nods to himself.

Easy peasy. His own lantern goes on one of the long tables, flickering in the muted light of the lanterns hanging on the walls. His cloak joins it. The room is still faintly warm from the day's activities, the stove's heat lingering even now as the cold seeps into the rest of the palace. This room is tucked in the dark depths of the mountain, layers of stone serving as insulation.

He finds the buttons for the ovens and stubbornly starts to try and figure them out. Okay, so they're different from the ones at home. Sue him. The ones at home had been kept perpetually lit, but these seem to go out at night. Tommy stares into the darkness of the stove and glares at the coals, which are still warm when he reaches out and hovers a hand over them.

...Okay, so he just has to find some matches and pile some of the firewood by the door into there. Easy. He knows how to light a fire in theory. He's never really done it in person before, but he can do it.

Matches. Matches and wood. Tommy stands up from his crouch and looks around the kitchen with wide eyes, squinting slightly as he scans the countertops and cabinets.

.... Where would they keep matches?

Bah, fuck this. He scowls slightly, rubbing his hands together and making his way over to the tables along the sides of the room, peering into each basket one by one. One of them only holds bread, the other a variety of dried fruit. He takes a piece of what he thinks might be dried apricot and stuffs it into his mouth, and then something else catches his eyes. A handle in the floor, covered by a dried mat of reeds. He easily kicks the rug aside and gets his fingers in the handle, swinging the trapdoor up. Below it—

Below it is cheese. And a lot of it. A short ladder descends into the darkness, and Tommy stares at the wheels and mounds and piles of stuff.

Fuck yeah. Snack time.

A knife, some crackers, and one very large block of cheddar later, Tommy is sitting at one of the long tables in the kitchen and enjoying himself quite thoroughly. He's more hungry than he thought he was, since he hadn't eaten since being out in the square this morning with Wilbur. And he thinks maybe Ponk was right— he's hungry, but he's hardly gained any weight. Something about malnutrition and stress and calories burning in the cold. He wishes he could figure out the stoves so he could make something hot to drink (it would be perfect) but for now he's content to just sink his teeth into some crackers and cheese and top one with dried fruit. It's so good in some visceral way— a meal he chose on his own, in a place he got to on his own, with no one watching him. This is a victory!

And it's delicious, even if it's just cheese and crackers. He savors each and every bite, grinning to himself and resting his head on the table. Across the room, the servant's door taunts him. He'd gone through it not twelve hours before, and he knows where it leads. Through the barnyard, down to the wall, and beyond that, a gate that still lies open.

He could go, now.



He could just leave. Scour Raven's Flight for Dream like a lost duckling looking for their mother. He'd be on his own and so terribly free. He could make it, too. The walk isn't far, and while there must be guards, Tommy is so good at keeping out of sight. He'd be gone, and the palace wouldn't even know until mid-morning tomorrow. That's a ten or so hour's head start.

... Fuck, if he stole a horse, he could be out of the city by then.

Slowly, Tommy puts down the knife and the cracker in his hand. It crumbles against the table, and he pushes himself up with care. One hand reaches out and snags his cloak. It's warm and thick enough to keep him safe through the night, and while he is dressed in his pajamas, he can surely find something else to wear while he— goes.

The door beckons, swirling knots in the wood like eyes. They besmirch him, call to him, blink slowly and gracefully. *Come on*, they say, like a grandfather in their old age and wisdom. The door that once had been a tree is old, older than Tommy, older than anything else, and it calls to him. The freedom it represents, the gooey, sweet, vinegar-salt entrapment. *Come on*.

He slips out from the bench, and gently slings the cloak over his shoulders. Grabs the block of cheddar on second thought.

And then behind him, the kitchen door opens.

"Oh," someone says. "Sorry, didn't know anyone was still—"

He knows that voice. It is deep, and it is cruel, but right now it sounds kind of tired and raspy in a way that means someone has just woken from sleep. He whips around with startled blue eyes as the lantern on the table flickers dangerously, his fingers inches away from the handle. General Technoblade blinks back at him, hair pulled into a messy lump on the back of his head with various strands hanging down. If Tommy had been surprised to see the man without armor, color him shocked now as Technoblade stands before him in *pajamas*.

"Oh," the general says again, clearing his throat. "You."

Tommy is just about ready to start screaming and bolt. He expects Technoblade to be angry, to be furious with him and ask where his guards are, ask why he's here alone. He expects to be scolded for the mess on the table in front of them, for snooping in a place he doesn't belong. To be so clearly headed for the door. But all he does instead is tip his head gently and survey the scene with quiet eyes, then move forward into the room. Tommy cringes away, but Technoblade doesn't even cross the same side of the table as him, instead going over to one of the stoves and reaching one long arm up to the metal tins hanging above. He takes out matches— dammit!— and strikes one with ease, the curvature of his face glowing orange with the small flame as he moves it down and lights one of the stovetops. Tommy stays where he is, frozen in both fear and confusion as the older man tips his head back and raises a brow.

"What?" he asks, hands reaching across the stove in order to pull a kettle over. "Cat got your tongue, pup?"

“Don’t tell,” Tommy says, letting his breath go in a gust of terror. “Please, don’t tell. I’m already in so much trouble.”

Philza would surely be furious. Technoblade seems to consider his words for a moment, turning around and bracing his hands on the stove as he leans his hips back against them. His pajamas are simple— loose pants, fuzzy slippers, a warm woolen top. His glasses hang around his neck on a chain, and Tommy inhales.

“As long as you don’t tell either,” Technoblade says. It’s not what Tommy expects. He blinks again, and Technoblade gestures to the bench where Tommy had just been sitting. “Sit. I’ll make you something warm.”

“You can cook?” Tommy asks.

The general snorts. “No,” he says. “But I can make a drink.”

“Honeyed milk?” Tommy asks hopefully, but the general shakes his head.

“No,” he repeats. “You’ll see. You’ll like it.”

Tommy sits, the bench still slightly warm from where he’d been earlier. The cheese is on the table once more, and he hunches over into himself to make a smaller target. But despite the fear, as Tommy watches the general he stays where he is, no threat on his face whatsoever.

“Aren’t you going to ask?” Tommy asks after a minute or two of silence. Technoblade hums.

“What do you want me to ask?” he counters, and Tommy grits his teeth.

“Why I’m here,” he says. “What am I doing by myself?”

“Alright.” The older man settles back further against the stove, clasping his hands in front of himself. “Why are you here? What are you doing by yourself?”

“I snuck out,” Tommy says. “The guard in front of my room was sleeping, so I came here because I’ve been here before, this morning.”

“With Wilbur,” Technoblade says with a nod, then the rest of Tommy’s statement seems to sink in. “Wait— they were sleepin’? I swear to— alright. Whatever. I see.”

Tommy hesitates. Then, with care: “Are you angry?”

Technoblade is watching him with just as much, if not more care. “No,” he says. “I figured you’d sneak off at some point. It was only a matter of time. You’re craftier than we give you credit for.”

“Thanks,” Tommy mutters, kicking his feet under the table. The movement draws the general’s eyes, so after a moment he stops. “Figured you’d be sick of my face after today, though.”

“I’ll admit, I didn’t expect you to sneak off again so soon,” Technoblade says, tipping his head in admission. “But I can respect it.”

“Moment of opportunity,” Tommy says, cutting himself another bite of cheese and eyeing him as he shoves it in his mouth. Then, with his mouth full: “Got to take chances where you see them.”

“If it weren’t being used against me, I’d say that’s a good attitude to have,” Technoblade says, and behind him the water steams. He turns, and his face disappears as he exposes his back to Tommy and starts to pour out hot water into two mugs. Tommy watches his hands intently, but takes a second to investigate the rest of him too. His hair is in a bun, although it’s a messy one. His shoulders are smaller without the imposing armor and cloak the man usually wears, and he’s leaner than Tommy initially thought, too. But he’s tall, enough so that Tommy has to look up at him especially while sitting down. The silver studs in his ears glint as he shifts and turns, scruff decorating his jawline, fingers deftly sprinkling a variety of herbs from jars into their drinks and straining it carefully. Tea, then. Or something like it. The honey is gold and glistening as Technoblade gives each mug a fair-sized dollop, stretching like warm taffy in the summer sun. Whatever this drink is, it’s gonna be sweet.

“Why are you up?” Tommy questions, and Technoblade stills for a moment before answering.

“I can’t sleep,” he says. Simple, factual. “My brain won’t let me. So I drink something warm and try to read.”

Such strange vulnerability. Tommy gnaws on his lip.

“I can’t sleep sometimes either,” he says in return. A small secret for a small secret. “My brain goes too fast. I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling and play checkers with myself.”

“You are a strange, strange kid,” the general says, stifling a laugh as he turns around and slides one of the mugs over to Tommy. He takes it with both hands, wrapping his fingers around the body and blowing the steam that’s rising above the rim.

“I’m not a kid,” Tommy insists with a scowl. “Or a pup. Checkers is better than reading, anyways.”

“Says the one who is constantly visiting the library,” the general counters, and Tommy blows again over the top of his drink to check his reaction.

“Shut up,” he murmurs. He raises the ceramic to his lips and exhales, blowing one last time before taking a very small sip.

“Careful,” Technoblade says. “It’s hot.”

“Die,” Tommy commands, and to his frustration and disappointment the man does not keel over immediately. Instead he does the complete opposite and cracks a smile of all things, lopsided and small.

“You’re running circles around us,” he says with a huff of amused air. His own mug is clasped between his hands, long fingers settling around his drink as he leans against the counter again. “And now Wilbur’s started to encourage it. You’re the strangest person I’ve ever met.”

Tommy lowers his drink back down to the table top and pretends he hadn’t just burnt his tongue. He shakes his head. “Not true,” he says. “According to you I’m just some annoying kid to torture and manipulate and gaslight and then, one day, probably kill.”

“You say a lot of things like they’re fact when the truth of the matter is, you have no idea what you’re talking about,” Technoblade says. “Confidence is a respectable trait, but it can be taken too far. Perfect example.” He gestures forward, out towards Tommy.

“Fuck you,” Tommy sings merrily back at him. How strange it is to have banter come this easily. General Technoblade is four times Tommy’s age and has killed countless people. Sure, Tommy’s killed people too, but that had been indirectly. He’s chatting shit right now with a man who has literal blood on his hands. Tommy wonders if the smell lingers. If that’s the reason he can’t sleep at night– if the faces haunt his dreams.

“Eloquent,” Technoblade murmurs, finally raising his drink to his lips. Tommy takes a moment to copy the motion, finding that while the drink is still near-boiling, it’s a little easier to sip on now. It’s sweet, and there’s the slight tang of alcohol in the back of his throat that’s immediately soothed by honey and aromatic tea. Tommy grimaces, if only for show. It’s *really* good.

They sit in silence for a bit. Tommy’s reminded of the time they spent traveling together, the long roads between Caterwaul and here. He and Technoblade had shared a carriage cabin for nearly two weeks, and came out of it more angry with each other than not. This silence, though– it’s companionable. If Tommy didn’t know better, he’d say they were actually tolerating each other long enough for the company to be enjoyable. Even the silence is alright. He’s happy to sit, drinking their strange warm drinks and tracing the wood grain of the table with his finger.

“Were you about to try and leave?” Technoblade asks after some time. His voice startles Tommy, his shoulders shooting up and entire body jolting. He takes a second to compose himself, then immediately scoffs.

“Like I’d get far,” he says. A brief pause. “Yeah. I was.”

“Fair enough,” Technoblade mutters into his drink, taking another sip. “I’m going to ask you a stupid question, but I’d like you to seriously think on it.”

“Fire away, old man,” Tommy says with only half the energy he’d usually give a quip like that.

“Are you happy here?”

And Tommy’s first thought is: man, that *is* a stupid fucking question.

“No,” he says. Technoblade had asked him to think on the question, and it’s not difficult to come to an answer. “It’s shit. It’s cold. You’re all mean. I’ve been humiliated for the past month and a half. Sick, too.”

“You told us the other day that you’d rather be dead,” Technoblade says, seemingly not phased by his answer. “Does that still hold true?”

Tommy thinks of Dream. There’s a brief, bare sliver of hope left for him there.

“No,” he says honestly. “Today was...” *Fun* . He lets his sentence trail off instead.

“Wilbur tends to bring that out in people,” the general mutters, and when Tommy glances up at him again he’s smiling faintly. He’s not looking at Tommy, though; no, his gaze is locked somewhere on the far wall just above his head, eyes far away and fuzzy as he thinks something that Tommy is not privy to.

“The bitchiness?” Tommy asks. The general snorts a laugh, tea sloshing over the side of his mug.

“Yes,” he admits. “And other things.”

“You know who’s a bitch?” Tommy says, because it’s late at night and he’s never been one to censor himself anyways. “Emperor Philza. He’s a bitch. And a dick.”

“He’s trying his best,” Technoblade says firmly. “You of all people should know how difficult his job is.”

“Fuck that,” Tommy says bitterly, a rise of anger and petulance growing in the center of his chest. It’s been there— background noise to the cacophony of his busy mind, but now it makes itself known in a red-hot vat of boiling lard that sticks to his throat and makes him cough up acid. “Fuck that, and you know it. I do know how hard it is, and that means that my judgement of whatever the fuck he’s doing is more valid than any of yours. And I say he’s doing a shit fucking job of it right now, especially concerning me.” Tommy pokes at his own chest, scowling deeply. “Not to— not to be— not to get self-centered or anything, but for Prime’s sake just figure out what the *hell* to do with me. I’m living a fucking endless purgatory right now, and it sucks. You just sit here and boss the guards around— you have no idea what it’s like, no idea what we do.”

Technoblade stands there, a statue in the face of Tommy’s sudden rage, and it just makes him angrier. His chest heaves and all the general does is stand, watching him with calm, quiet eyes.

“Do you know what my job is?” Technoblade asks after a minute. Tommy opens his mouth. “*Other* than bossing the guards around.”

“Leader of the army,” Tommy spits immediately. Of course he knows. He’s not five. “Shit like that.”

“Right,” Technoblade says. “But I’m also Phil’s main advisor. I’m his right-hand man, personal bodyguard, best friend. Yes, he wrote that into my contract. No, I did not approve.” Tommy snorts. “But my point still stands— I am two steps to the left of the emperor’s shoulder every single day, while fighting every battle. I see everything. I hear most. I offer advice when I can and whenever Phil asks it of me. If Phil was becoming a tyrant, I would depose him without question. And if I were to go beyond my station, Phil would take care of me. We are each other’s checks and balances. I keep him on the straight and narrow, and he keeps me—”

“Out of the pits.” Tommy squints, thinking back to what little stories he knew about where the general had come from. Not any noble family, that’s for sure. Technoblade’s face twists for a second, but it morphs into calm again before Tommy can react. He forges onward. “But he’s just placed you into a different ring, hasn’t he? A general isn’t much different than a fist-fighter.”

“This is different. I choose to be here,” Technoblade says. “Every day, I choose to be here.”

“Why?” Tommy asks. Then, in some sick parody of the question Technoblade had asked him earlier: “Are you happy here?”

The general is quiet. He nods once, very briefly. “The happiest moments of my life have been in this very palace,” he says. “I may not agree with some things Phil does. I may not agree with the Continental politics at all, but yet... You care for your people, don’t you?” he asks. Tommy nods immediately. Of course he does. His people are his everything, even now.

“Yes,” he says, because the love he holds for them is fierce and sparking, brighter than any firecracker. “I do.”

“And I love mine,” Technoblade says. “Which is why I’m here. To help them in any way I can. We’re not so different, pup. I came from my people— I wasn’t born into nobility. I’m sure you know that.”

“They say Philza found you on the side of the road,” Tommy says, a smile curving up his face for a moment. He leans against the table, tipping his head. “Is that true?”

“More like I found him,” Technoblade says, tucking his fur around himself further and smiling as though he’d told a joke that Tommy doesn’t understand. His fingers still hold the mug, careful not to spill anymore. Tommy sips from his own, now cool enough for a good swallow of the drink. “That was a long time ago, though. I’m different now. Much more adjusted.”

“Still not a fan of parties,” Tommy astutely points out.

“I wasn’t brought up navigating them,” Technoblade says. “Not everyone can have your subtle grace when it comes to political events.” He mimes the tipping of a glass, and Tommy’s smile is quick to sour.

“Shut up,” he says eloquently. “I did that on *purpose* , actually.”

“Did you?” Technoblade raises a brow. “Fascinating. Maybe you’re less of a pushover than I thought.”

“I hate you,” Tommy informs him politely. “You are— you are a dickhead, Technoblade. An absolute dickhead.”

“Says the one who spilled wine all over some poor girl’s dress. She was probably debuting, since the war just ended. And you ruined her night.” Technoblade raises his glass to his lips. “What a shame.”

“They’re all annoying, anyhow,” Tommy says dismissively. He thinks back to Sally Salmon in her music shop, and the way Wilbur’s eyes had lit up when she’d come out of the back. “Girls.”

“Let’s not discuss that,” Technoblade says.

“Why don’t you have a wife?” Tommy asks instead, because clearly the general does not want to talk about it and Tommy is nothing if not annoying. “Or a husband. I don’t judge.”

“Oh- *kay*,” Technoblade huffs, pushing off the counter and nodding towards him. “Up you go. Let’s get you back to bed.”

Tommy gets up at Technoblade’s request, but he’s still a bit wary. He grasps his mug firmly, holding it close to his chest and hard enough to throw it if need be. “... You’re not mad?” he checks again, just to be sure. The general shakes his head.

“I will keep my mouth shut if you do,” he tells Tommy. “My word.”

“Fine.” Escape attempts can be had another night, then. Tommy’s tired of running anyways. He tried that. He tried diplomacy too, and look where it got him. Strange, the feeling now that makes itself known. It’s anger again (and Tommy is intimate with anger) but it’s of a different sort. A quieter kind. A kind more dangerous and fierce than before. Colder, too. Tommy’s always run hot— even when he was a little kid he’d get fevers, fingers and forehead steaming with how hot they’d be. Dream had always joked Tommy carried too much spite inside him to contain it all. Tommy thinks now that might be true.

He’s angry, but right now in the quiet night, a balm is laid over his nerves. Maybe he’s just adjusting to the cold.

They make their way out of the kitchen, Technoblade dampening the flame on the stovetop and Tommy leaving his mess of crackers and cheese behind. Up the stairs they go, past paintings and tapestries, footsteps quiet in the dark of the night. The whole kingdom is asleep except for them two, alone in a palace that is more like a prison than a home. Tommy has an inkling he’s not the only person to feel that way.

They make it to Tommy’s door. The guard is miraculously still asleep; Technoblade eyes them with clear disdain, but doesn’t wake them just yet. Instead, he opens the door and Tommy moves to step inside. Something stops him, though— the general’s voice, echoing in the dimly-lit hall.

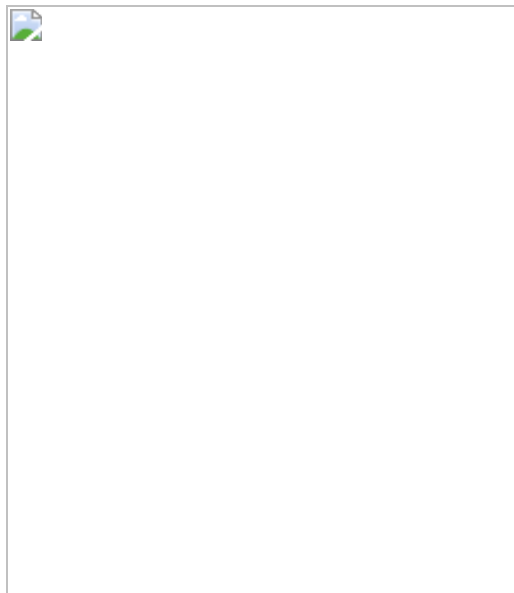
“Tomorrow,” he says. Technoblade’s hand is on his shoulder, and it’s warmer than even the mug of tea still in Tommy’s hands. He looks up, meeting the man’s gaze as his bedroom door lies open in front of them both. Steam rises between the loose strands of Technoblade’s hair, and Tommy wonders if his own hair is still messy. There is a certain type of vulnerability that makes itself known in the middle of the night. An understanding that has come to pass. It’s the tide, coming and going with the push and pull and promise of the moon. It’s a secret, quiet thing, held tightly to one’s chest and given names that are intangible and pretentious. They call it monachopsis, or vertigo, or ennui. Liminal space in the brain.

“Stay in the atrium after you and Wilbur have your little bitch session or whatever it is you two do,” Technoblade says, and Tommy is taken aback at the swear for a brief moment. “I have the afternoon free. Alright?”

Tommy nods once, then twice. Technoblade’s gaze never leaves him, but he refuses to look him back in the eyes— instead he’s staring at Tommy’s hair, or the curl of fingers around his mug, or the sleeve of his pajamas. “Alright,” Tommy says, and Technoblade’s hand drops off his shoulder and gives him a soft nudge with his knuckles.

“Goodnight, pup,” Technoblade says. This time bothers Tommy less than any other before; maybe it’s the slight fondness in the general’s gruff tone, or the way he yawns at the tail end of the sentence, some raw humanity. Emotion pours through Tommy’s chest, a mixture of guilt and exhaustion and confusion, but he’s slipping into his room before he lets himself say anything else. Spilling his traitorous guts would be bad— he’s got a part to play. He glances down at the dregs of tea leaves in his mug and blinks.

Maybe he’d misheard the odd sort of softness in Technoblade’s tone. That would make more sense, yes. Tommy is tired in a way he hasn’t been in a long, long time, and the bed welcomes him with open arms as he staggers to lie down.





BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

some bedrock for the bedrock enjoyers out there (i see you spud!) there's more where that came from, too. i'm delighted to let you all know we're gonna be digging into the real juicy plot of this story soon, and the wordcount is just as 100k !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! this is the longest fic i've written to date and im so happy with it, genuinely. ty all for your support !!!!!

and if you wanna support more, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc III. - like a ram at the altar

### Chapter Summary

tws: minor injuries, implied abuse of a child

this chapter was beta'd by the lovely TJ/definitelynotshouting!!!!

### Chapter Notes

o/ hey guys!! just a reminder, there will be a week break, so no new chapter next week! i need some time to backlog some chapters and just chill a bit (finals have killed me) plus christmas is coming up and things are gonna be busy. however, i will be posting on christmas eve and new years! enjoy the chapter!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)



Morning comes. Tommy wakes up, but Wilbur doesn't come for him. The door to his room remains closed, even as the day drags on. No one comes.

He goes to the atrium by himself.

It's empty. The prince is nowhere to be seen, and his words still sting from yesterday. Tommy is confused— he's got conflicting memories now, of a time when Wilbur had been all at once kind and cruel to him. Tommy's not sure if he wants the prince to be nice or not either; everything he'd said had seemed condescending at best.

He wears the earrings Wilbur got him anyways. Just in case he happens upon the older boy in the hallway.

The night with the general had left him confused too, but at least with a goal in mind. Stay in the atrium until the afternoon, and Technoblade would presumably meet him there. For what,

Tommy has no idea. But he sticks around anyway, lounging his morning away in the grass and soaking up what little sun there is. There isn't much— one of the servants answers his questions, and apparently it's going to snow on and off for the next three days straight if they're unlucky. The atrium roof is made of enchanted glass, and the girl explains to him with kind words that it melts any snow coming down on it. But sometimes, in the worst of the storms, it can't keep up and they have to manually clear it off instead.

For now it stays uncovered, though. Through it, Tommy can see the grey sky above.

General Technoblade arrives a little after noon.

The doors swing open on the far side of the room and Tommy scrambles to his feet where he had been previously sitting, reading through a history book he'd taken out. It's all about the Cataclysm— magical theory and all that. Tubbo had recommended it to him, something about learning how the crack in the veil between worlds affected children born around that time (Tommy tries not to be bitter about that one, he knows what everyone says about him) but it's so full of jargon he'd had trouble keeping up. Honestly, he was sleeping more than reading at this point. So when Technoblade comes out of the small grove of trees and dumps a clattering pile of metal at the edge of the dirt, Tommy startles.

"What are you doing?" he asks, snapping his book shut and propping himself up on his elbows. He squints. "Is that a sword?"

"No," General Technoblade says, giving the pile of swords a kick. They clang against one another. "These are toothpicks."

"Fuck off," Tommy says, but he's throwing the book to the side anyway and scrambling to his feet. Is the general going to arm him? Strange. He hadn't taken the man as someone to take unnecessary risks. He steps forward anyway, always keeping an eye on Technoblade as he goes, but the general does nothing except step back and let Tommy inspect the pile on his own. He's not even wearing armor. "What are these for?"

"Fighting," Technoblade says easily. "We've got enough of them to spare. You seem restless. Let's get some of that energy out."

"I'm not restless," Tommy insists, although he's already digging through the pile of both sharp and dull blades, picking up a sword occasionally to check if it fits in his hand and balances right. Eventually he finds one that's good enough— a long arming sword, fitted with a neat leather handle and blade smudged but clearly well-kept. He backs away from the general in order to give it a few good swings, bringing his opposite hand up for balance. When he looks back over his shoulder, Technoblade is watching with narrowed eyes. "What? Surprised I know how to hold a sword?"

"No," the older man says easily, reaching down and taking one up from the remaining pile. His is longer— probably a longsword, but Technoblade easily holds it with one hand, gripping the hilt and raising it to study the edge of the blade. "You're royalty. I would expect nothing less."

Tommy extends his arm, the sword tip pointing beyond it. He aims it right at Technoblade's head, and he catches the moment the other notices it. He pauses, tipping his head up and meeting Tommy's gaze over the metal.

"Are we sparring?" Tommy asks. The general nods once, sharp.

"We are," he says. "Let's start with a basic attack and parry."

"That's for babies," Tommy complains, but falls into a proper stance despite it. Technoblade approaches and Tommy moves backwards, giving them both some space. He is nervous—he bounces on his toes, shifts his grip, never takes his eyes off the general. This is Technoblade. Monster of the Kirnach. Legendary on the battlefield. Tommy is not about to take sparring with him lightly, as much as he pretends. "I've been doing that since I was two."

"Two?" Technoblade raises an eyebrow. "That's young."

"Soon as I could walk," Tommy says. "You gonna fight me or what, old man?"

Technoblade's eyes narrow. He raises his own sword carefully, and gives it a few practice swings. Tommy waits.

"I'll go easy on you," the general says. Tommy grits his teeth, and braces.

Fighting the general is like being in the center of a thunderstorm. Lightning, crashing down in silver swoops of holy wrath on either side. Thunder in the crack of metal-on-metal, ringing in his ears and sending vibrations shuddering up his forearms and into his chest. True to his word, Technoblade only does a few attack-parry's before backing off, both of them already out of breath. Tommy had managed to block what attacks had been thrown his way, but only barely.

"Good," Technoblade says. Tommy's chest heaves. "Hanging right, to inside block."

Tommy does as he says, swirling his sword around his wrist.

"Don't be a show off," Technoblade murmurs, eyeing his form. "Not bad. Who taught you?"

"My own general," Tommy says. That's a lie—Dream was mainly the one that taught him past the age of four. In swordsmanship, at least. He's not the best at archery, worse at jousting. Hand-to-hand combat is the only other fighting skill he's got. "He could rival you." Another lie. Tommy's general would lose in a heartbeat. Dream, however. He's good.

"Doubtful," Technoblade says. He levels his sword. "Again."

And so they go.

Sparring goes like this: attack, parry, pull back. Attack, block, pull back. Technoblade is scathing in his criticism and does not offer anything other than short, clipped compliments. Praise is hard to drag out of him, prickly, like a rosebush. Tommy plucks each thorn out and tosses them back, breathless, exhilarated.

“You’re not shit at this, pup,” he quips one time, readjusting his sweaty grip on the handle. Every inch of him is sore– he hasn’t gotten this much exercise in months. Technoblade laughs. The man isn’t even sweating, and Tommy grits his teeth.

“Will you stop?” he asks, digging his heels into the dirt. He’s shed his outer layers now, only clad in a pale white undershirt and trousers, his boots filthy with dust. “Calling me that. I’m not a kid *or* a dog.”

Technoblade hums, shuffling his shoulders. “The only difference between you and a dog right now,” he says slowly, carefully, eyes on Tommy, “is a dog can be let loose into the courtyard and actually be expected to behave itself.”

Tommy sees red. Fighting isn’t an easy thing. It’s short and quick and takes most of your stamina– anyone can romanticize a battlefield, but at the end of the day, anyone can also be holding their guts with one hand and bleed out on one too. That was the fate of many of Tommy’s soldiers. All while he’d been pampered up in his safe little palace, being fed lines from a script. Technoblade’s quips about him being some sort of pampered dog– they hit harder than they should, and so he lets his anger carry him. He’s delighted by the true surprise on the older man’s face as he throws himself into the fight, actually aiming to hurt now. Their blades are dull but still made of cool metal, and so when Tommy fails to dodge and block the blow, it slices through the fabric of his shirt like paper and then his skin. Red bleeds from the wound, and Tommy backs away, breathing hard.

“Channel,” Technoblade murmurs, huffing out a breath. Then, in Northal, warningly: “Little one, watch your step.”

“Fuck off,” Tommy spits back, and Technoblade raises a brow. His accent’s rusty, but he knows the language. “I can fight just as well as you.”

“Is that so?” Technoblade’s head tilts. “You fight like a fish, slippery and–”

Warm iron, thick, scenting the air. Technoblade looks down at the lunge he’d instinctively parried, but had just slightly let cross the skin of his hand. Across his wrist is a wound to match Tommy’s; smaller, but a testament to Tommy’s own skill.

He’s wounded the general.

Oh Prime, he’s completely fucked.

“Have you ever fought on a real battlefield?” General Technoblade asks. Tommy keeps his eyes on the older man, backing away with slow, careful, even steps. Ready to drop his sword and run if the man so much as makes a move towards him. He’s enjoyed the last few hours with Technoblade, but he doesn’t doubt he would show him some corporal punishment if it came down to it.

“No,” Tommy says slowly, carefully. The general is inspecting his hand.

“It’s not like this,” Technoblade tells him. “The very air is heavy. The weight of what you are doing is on your shoulders, but you never think about it. Every body is just that– a body.

Nobody is real. Nothing is solid except for your own men and the strategies you put them on the path towards.”

Whatever this is, Tommy’s not sure he’s getting it. “Yeah?” he asks. “Okay?”

Technoblade still doesn’t look up. “It’s not like this,” he says. “Fighting in a real fight is hard, and it isn’t fun. You don’t think about footwork and positions. You don’t have time to think ahead. It’s just one step after the other, and you have one goal. Survive. Winning isn’t even important, then. Not when you’re surrounded by dead men and gore. Do you remember when I made you watch?”

Tommy does. He dreams of it still– the burning pyres of dead bodies, bloated, lips blue and rolled back to reveal grinning teeth. Eyes nothing but black holes, fingers picked down to bone by vultures. He can remember the stench of Hopsfield.

“Yeah,” he breathes.

“That’s what it’s like,” Technoblade tells him. “But everything is fresh, and you are on the verge of death. This is a parody of that. Here, we pull punches. Here, everything is a game.”

“The war is over,” Tommy says quietly. “I signed the papers.”

“Doesn’t mean the fighting ends,” Technoblade says, and then finally, he looks up, clenching his fist and wiping the blood on his pants. “You’re smart. Don’t let it get to your head. Fight me again.”

“Are you angry?” Tommy asks in a breath.

Technoblade raises a brow. “Do I look angry?”

“Should that matter?”

They stare at one another, then Technoblade raises his weapon.

“Fight me,” he instructs. “Blood for blood.”

“Don’t hit me with your cult shit,” Tommy says, and raises his own sword again.

“Wow.” Technoblade is deadpan. “Real nice of ya.”

“It’s a joke,” Tommy insists, digging his feet into the soil, some of his anxiety dripping away. Technoblade throws his head back and– he laughs, a ridiculously forced action.

“Ha ha ha,” he grumbles, tipping his head back. “Very funny joke.”

“I knew you’d laugh,” Tommy mumbles. They circle like vultures, street dogs on corners fighting over scraps. Every movement is a monument to desperation, Tommy sorely wanting to prove himself as more than just a kid who only can take advantage of a moment’s distraction. The garden is warm around them, fuzzy with heat. Tommy forces a grin, squinting so hard that his vision narrows and Technoblade becomes nothing but a smear of

color against the trees. Red on green. He bounces on his toes, hefts the sword in his hand. Tommy's not a shit fighter, not by any means, but he's facing down the Blood God's favored. Ask around any small village on the Continent and they will know of him and of his exploits.

Tommy exhales, shifts his grip, and allows Technoblade to come to him.

This time when their swords clash, there are sparks.

The general's feet move before his arms do, a lightning-fast display of footwork and skill, but Tommy sees it coming. He sees it coming and he doesn't think; there's no theory, it's just pure instinct as he brings his arm up to defend himself. Their swords cross. Technoblade grins, all teeth, and suddenly Tommy understands what he meant a few seconds ago when he'd mentioned pulling punches and how on the battlefield, everything you learn in classes is just a game. Because this is real, and the weight of the sword is heavy in his palm and he's not *thinking* about his footwork, he's just doing it. Again their swords collide and Tommy's on the defensive, but that's okay. He slides to the left, hilt crossing hilt as Technoblade braces himself and pushes, and Tommy lets the force move him backwards. And there's a feint to his right; he reacts in turn, and he's sweating already in the heat of the atrium and light of the sun. Dust paints his boots and he's out of breath and out of practice but *holding his own*, at least in this moment.

"That's good, Tommy!" Technoblade says, voice pitching high over the sound of their blades crossing once more. Tommy risks an attack, and Technoblade is forced to duck. His hair shines and his skin is also slick, and he's still grinning. "That's good!"

At the compliment, Tommy practically wants to shout. Technoblade— follower of the Blood God, general of the fucking Antarctic Empire, the man who won the war against his country— is complimenting *him* on his swordsmanship. It's a drug like no other. Fire races through his veins and he thinks back to spars with Sapnap. This is not so different, not when Technoblade fights with flames coursing from his limbs and viciousness curling on his lip. When Sapnap and Tommy had fought, they'd often drawn blood. It had been forgiven the moment the match was over, of course, but their spars had always held more anger and contempt and desperation than the ones Tommy had with Dream or his tutors. When he and Sapnap fought, it had been a dance. It had been a brotherhood.

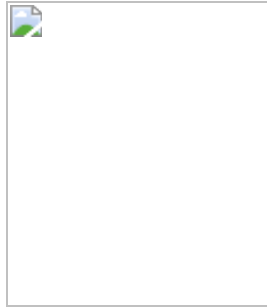
This is so similar that Tommy is fighting back those feelings once more, ducking and weaving, using his small stature to trip Technoblade up instead of attacking him head-on. That would be a death sentence, and he refuses to let the general draw unequal blood. He's not sure when they stopped pulling their punches, but it's gotten far more fun in the past thirty seconds than it has been in the past hour.

The general gets a hit on him, and his head stings. He gets a hit on the general, and he delights in the way Techno's grasp on his sword falters once or twice due to the blood making it slippery. After he gets the hit on Tommy they both pull back, Tommy dragging the tip of his sword in the dirt and letting the dust settle. And then— then, there is an understanding between them; something visceral and raw, like bloody meat held in the triumphant fist of a hunter. Something violent and intimate, the kind of understanding that goes beyond just swinging swords at each other with intent to hurt. It's respect. It's Tommy using his own pure-

white sleeve to wipe the blood off his blade and Technoblade offering up his own neck kerchief to Tommy in return, so he can get the stinging salting blood out of his eyes from the cut on his forehead. They've made each other bleed more than once, now— and that in itself is an oath.

Don't get Tommy wrong— he still doesn't like Technoblade. But he respects him. He doesn't think he'll ever truly *like* Techno; they are too different, too wild, albeit on opposite ends of the spectrum. They both care too deeply in ways that oppose the other and in that way, they will never be equal in affection.

But respect is a currency Tommy knows well. He's dealt in it more than once, gambled his life on it. And based on the way Technoblade grins at him now, baring his teeth and looking everything the seasoned warrior, Tommy knows he's earned it.



*Dear Tubbo,*

*So, this morning, I fought the general...*

“Not bad,” Technoblade says later, when they’re both being fretted over by His Majesty’s Royal Physician.

“Shut up!” Ponk says, whapping Technoblade’s arm so hard Tommy’s surprised it doesn’t *ding* like metal when the man remains unflinching. “You’re both stupid! Making me waste potions.”

“You can just use bandages—” Tommy tries to insist for the third time (because he’s had this thought already, and wasting potions on something as silly as himself during wartime is bad enough but the Empire probably has a good amount stockpiled, right? And based on how Technoblade laughs it off— maybe they’re fine, maybe, maybe—).

“Oh, shut it,” Ponk says a second later, his hands now fretting over Tommy’s forehead instead of Technoblade’s arm. Tommy hisses as the familiar sting of healing is applied evenly over his cut. “You get whatever you want. Him, however.” A glare is shot in the direction of the general. “Your grace, you’ve had an exciting two days. Bed for the rest of today.” A scowl appears on his face. “Don’t make me come find you. Don’t make him do it either.” He points at Technoblade with an accusing finger before turning away to start cleaning up. Tommy reaches up to pat at his forehead, wiping his fingers over the now-smooth skin. Technoblade is grimacing, when they look at each other once more.



“Free to go?” Tommy asks hesitantly.

“Bed,” Ponk insists. “And a warm fire!”

“Yessir,” Tommy mumbles, sliding off the cot in the infirmary and planting his feet on the ground. He feels fine, arguably, but he knows Ponk is ridiculous when it comes to making sure his orders are followed through. And crawling into bed right about now sounds good. His entire body is sore from the exercise he’d gotten today, and so he doesn’t hesitate to start walking in the direction of his room. The general walks behind him and a bit to the left as they go, a white bandage wrapped neatly around his hand.

“I’ll let the others know you’ll be in your room today,” Technoblade says as they approach his door. Tommy stops and turns, eyeing him up and down once, then twice.

“Do you hate me?” he asks bluntly.

“No,” the general says. He meets Tommy’s eyes, red-on-blue.

“Did you ever?” Tommy asks. Mutely, the general presses his lips together in a flat line, then shrugs.

“How am I to tell?” he asks. “I think it’s easy to say that things are often deeper than they seem. Go rest, pup.”

“I’ve told you not to call me that,” Tommy says, but there’s little fire in his voice anymore. Techno just chuckles, and puts a hand on Tommy’s head. It’s warm, a sinking heat with fingers that creep down and brace. It’s sturdy. He gives his hair a ruffle once, twice, and then lets go.

“Rest,” he orders, and turns away.

*Dear Tubbo,*

*Good news! You may not be my only friend! Bad news— the prince is a spoiled brat.*

Tommy does not, in fact, rest.

He stays in bed for a few hours, sure. He’ll never pass up the opportunity for a nap ( *Prime, Tommy, you’re getting lazy*, Dream mutters in his ear) but after that he’s just bored. Bored of his room and its stupid yellow theme, even if it’s better than blue. Bored of Technoblade, who is prissy and large and insists on guarding Tommy personally when he has spare time. Bored of feeling useless and tired and miserable.

So he goes to the drawing room.

Usually he can find someone there, be it Kristin or her ladies, or maybe Technoblade on a slow day. Never does he find anyone there during the morning sessions while everyone's out working and never in the evenings, just before dinner, but midday is a good time for people to be lounging or working, looking for a change in scenery. Tommy, of course, has no duties other than *be good*, so he finds himself here most often. It's a beautiful room— large shining windows, huge flowing curtains that are thick and heavy. The walls are mostly bookshelves, except around the fireplace. The fireplace itself is brick and stone and kept roaring all day every day, fighting off the chill.

The carpet is plush and good to run one's hands through or feel against your forehead or back. The ceiling in contrast consists of stamped metal squares. Tommy's spent a good amount of time on his back here, just staring up endlessly at his own warped reflection as the carpet stays plush beneath him. The whole room is filled with chrysanthemums and coated in every corner with shades of blue, grey, and white.

It's a good room. Solid. Handy for entertaining when you're miserably bored like Tommy often is.

Tommy pushes the door open without issue. He steps inside, again without issue. Ponk has threatened to sic Technoblade on him if he spent the day out of bed, but Tommy's sure the general is busy until at least suppertime. The hinges are deadily quiet as he steps inside, and everything is fine until he spots a stupid head of brown hair hunched over the couch, just barely visible over the edge of it. The prince is bowed, and paper is strewn across the floor. The guards wait just inside the door as Tommy makes his way in, and he gives one of the stray pieces of paper a kick. It flutters— it looks like sheet music, when he tips his head to study it.

"Hello," Wilbur says without looking up. "Mother, if you—" His head rises, and he cuts off suddenly. "Oh. It's you."

"Don't sound so pleased," Tommy grits out, giving the sheet music another kick and stepping on it for good measure.

"Why are you here?" Wilbur says. He sounds like a priss. He *is* a priss.

"I'm allowed," Tommy says. "Also it's one of the rooms I generally know the location of."

"Right," Wilbur says, tipping his head back down. His shoulders move and paper rustles as though he's gathering his things— Tommy's proven right when he peeks over the back of the couch and finds more fucking paper on the cushions. "Well, I'm busy, so go to whatever room is next on that list and bother someone there."

"Can't," Tommy says. "Next room is the atrium, and I've been there already."

"Don't care," Wilbur says.

"You're being a bitch," Tommy informs him with a deep scowl. Wilbur tips his head up— Tommy blinks, but holds his place and refuses to flinch at the sudden eye contact. The prince has eyes like gold, whirling honey. They have a standoff for a brief minute, and Wilbur is the

one to break the gaze. He snaps his eyes back down to his music and finishes gathering the sheafs into one pile, setting it aside with pursed lips and a hesitant look.

“Come sit,” he finally offers, patting at the couch awkwardly.

Tommy makes his way around, and sits. “You were just telling me to leave,” he says but Wilbur just shakes his head and pats the cushions once more, not bothering to explain his generally confusing temper. They sit for a second, silence splitting the room worse than a crevasse opened during the Cataclysm. There’s a divide between them that seems impossible to bridge, but Wilbur tries. Tommy’s not sure what he’s expecting— he knows what he wants, yes, but he doesn’t expect the prince to apologize, not truly.

“We’re leaving,” Wilbur says. Tommy sits and waits, not saying a word. “When the snow melts. We’re leaving to visit the other kingdoms. The Isles, the Vaults, Libra. I’m going to vouch for you to come with us,” Wilbur says, still sitting stiffly. “I think you deserve it. I think it’s important.”

“Important for what?” Tommy scoffs, letting himself slouch some. “Important for the others to see how far down you’ve beaten me?”

“Think of it as an apology,” Wilbur soothes. He shakes his hand about, talks with his fingers and fiddles as he thinks. “We all know you hate it here. You’re not exactly transparent on the matter.”

“Of course I hate it,” Tommy says. He holds a hand up, extending a finger for every point he makes next. “It’s cold, it’s dark, it’s grey. Your food is awful. Your hospitality is worse. I’m not allowed outside. I’m not allowed to be alone. I’m—”

“Okay!” Wilbur says. “Okay, yeah, I get it, you child. Have you ever tried looking on the bright side?”

“What’s the bright side, exactly?” Tommy asks, tipping his head.

“You’re not dead,” Wilbur says with a nod.

“Wow,” Tommy drawls. “The bar is *still* that low.”

“Well—” Wilbur is flustered for all of two seconds before composing himself. “Well, you’re alive and what *used* to be your kingdom is surviving, so I’d say it’s still that low, yeah.”

Something twists, harsh and cutting in Tommy’s chest. “Thanks,” he mutters. “It’s great to know I’m appreciated in my time.”

“Well *I* don’t want you here,” Wilbur says scathingly, the bluster coming back. “In the— in the palace, that is. It’s a fucking mess is what it is, even if my father refuses to admit it. You’re a mess.” Tommy reels back as though he’s been struck, that pain lingering in the root of his sternum as his hands twist in his lap.

“I don’t want to be here either,” he says plainly. Of course Wilbur wouldn’t want him here. Why would he even think that Tommy is enjoying this? When he has made it so clear it’s

worse than torture? “What makes you think I’d like to be here?”

“Finally something we agree upon, then,” Wilbur says, turning his nose up.

“Fine,” Tommy says.

“Fine,” Wilbur repeats.

“*Fine*.”

“Fine!”

Both of them are turned away now. Tommy can barely see Wilbur out of the corner of his eye, and after a second, Wilbur turns. Tommy flinches, ducks— all he sees from below his forearm as it shelters his face is a hurt look on Wilbur’s head.

“I’m not going to hit you,” he says sharply. “Has someone... hit you before?”

“Shut up. You never know,” Tommy ignores the question entirely, countering, but lowers his arm regardless. He decides to go the defensive route. “What, Dad doesn’t want you marking up the prized canary? Caged birds tend not to sing if you treat them harshly.”

Wilbur gapes at him. “Why do you say such crass shit?” he asks a second later, and Tommy shrugs.

“I’m just telling it like it is,” he offers. Wilbur is quiet. They stare at one another.

“You spent time with Techno,” Wilbur notes. The obvious change in subject is painful to witness, but Tommy goes along with it anyhow.

“I did,” Tommy says. “I bested him in combat. Multiple times.”

“Liar,” Wilbur says astutely, maybe fondly. “He’s an asshole anyways.”

“He is not,” Tommy says, gasping in faux shock. Then he catches himself (defending him, really? After all he took from you?). “Well— maybe a bit.”

“He is,” Wilbur insists. “Don’t let him fool you into friendship. I’ve seen him take down soldiers like nobody’s business. And besides, he’s mine to love. Not yours.”

Tommy goes quiet, the retort on his lips drying up at the last sentence from Wilbur. He stares at the older boy and blinks, watching as his face hardly shifts at Tommy’s blatant surprise. Instead he tips his head down and watches as Tommy’s face crumples, vacillating between different expressions before settling on exhaustion.

“I hate you,” he says primly. Wilbur just laughs.

The prince is exactly what Tommy had been expecting and more. They say he’d been born with an emerald in his mouth, a crass sense of humor and charming smile that could woo any woman around. Tommy knows all of this is true and more— the prince is well-mannered,

brilliant, and gorgeously talented. He is everything a crown prince should be, if not a little lacking on the diplomatic side of things. (He makes Tommy feel inadequate in some ways, smart in others. The inadequacy often outweighs the rest.) But then again, Tommy brutally reminds himself, he is not bound to be polite to me. Not anymore. Tommy's not important to them except as a prisoner of the state.

"You're allowed to hate me," Wilbur tells him.

"*Your* general told me that exact same thing," Tommy says with a scowl, turning away. Wilbur coos, and then there's a hand in his hair and Tommy reels backwards, trying to escape the touch. He can't, of course; there's nowhere to go but a soft couch, pale blue velvet scrabbling against his fingers as Wilbur draws him backwards and into a strange half-embrace. He's got one arm around Tommy's bicep, the other hand planted firmly in his hair as he ruffles it vigorously. He shouts his protest and Wilbur just laughs, bells and musical tones filling the air. Eventually the teasing stops and Tommy's chest is heaving with his righteous anger, but he's kept firmly in place by Wilbur's hands.

"Do you remember when I told you my father gave you to me as a birthday present?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy's cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"Maybe," he says.

"That sentiment grows truer and truer every day," Wilbur tells him, and then lets go. Tommy wiggles out of his grasp and whirls around to face him, hands flying up to settle the wayward strands of hair flying around his face now. It's getting long—long enough that he can gather it in a small ponytail and even sometimes attempt to braid it. Dream never would've let him keep it this long down south. It tickles the back of his neck. He can't feel it in his anger.

"How dare you," he hisses. "I am not a *present*."

"I'm sorry," Wilbur says, and Tommy's about to reject the apology but Wilbur continues: "For what I said in the hallway after we were scolded. I was upset, but not at you."

The whiplash between conversation topics is going to be the death of him. Tommy falters—he still wants to be angry at Wilbur calling him a present, like some fucked up toy, but the apology seems genuine, and isn't that what he came here to seek in the first place? Conflicted, he pauses, and Wilbur takes the chance to explain himself further. "I was frustrated, and shouldn't have taken it out on you. I'm glad you enjoyed that morning with me, Tommy. I am. If it wasn't about to get unbearably cold, I'd argue more harshly for us to be allowed out like that weekly."

"Why?" Tommy asks. "I— you— after— I mean—"

"Take your time," Wilbur murmurs, and Tommy resists the urge to slap him.

"Why?" he asks. "Why did you take me in the first place?"

Wilbur takes a minute to actually think about his answer. Tommy finds himself appreciating that more than he can say—the quiet moment in which Wilbur *thinks*. "I know what it's like

to feel trapped,” he says simply. “And there is nothing better than occasionally kicking down the door keeping you in.”

“Like that gate you knocked in,” Tommy says. He’s smiling without knowing, and Wilbur’s lips quirk up. He laughs, almost surprised.

“I guess I meant that more literally than I thought,” he admits. “Yeah, like the gate.”

Tommy smiles, and—

And.

And something hits him just then.

It must show on his face, because Wilbur’s eyebrows draw in and he gets all *slow* and *careful* like they all do after Tommy flinches when someone moves too fast and too purposefully. But he’s too preoccupied with his own thoughts to be mad at it right now; the gate Wilbur had knocked in must still be open. They’re the only two that know of it at the moment, and surely Wilbur will forget the moment Tommy changes the subject. But Tommy won’t forget.

Tommy won’t let anyone else figure out what he’s just figured out.

There’s a crack in the palace wall. He’d been so *eager* to leave that late night in the kitchen with Technoblade. How could he have forgotten? How could he have been so stupid? There’s an answer sitting right in front of his face and he’s just been sitting on it like a mother hen! He drags a thumb over the brooch on his chest, the iron cool and meaningful under the pad of his finger.

“Tommy?” Wilbur asks, his voice cutting through Tommy’s internal monologue. He snaps back to reality and inhales, then exhales loudly.

“Do you think fairytales are for children?” he asks abruptly, and Wilbur’s clearly caught off guard. He pauses, then shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “I think they all have some truth. And morals that anyone can benefit from. Why do you ask?”

Tommy shoves the thought of the broken gate to the back of his mind for now. He can’t let Wilbur know what he’s thinking, if anything at all. “No reason,” he says. “No reason at all. Nope. No reason for me to care. Why do you care, hmm?”

“Is this your strange way of saying you want to read fairy tales?” the prince asks, and Tommy zips his lips together and shakes his head. Wilbur laughs and Tommy bites back a smile, doing his best to seem like that’s blatantly not what he’s asking for. His little ruse works, however. Wilbur is distracted, rising from his seat with an amused look towards Tommy and absently making his way towards the bookshelves, one hand tucked behind his back and the other scrounging the shelves as he looks back over his shoulder with a smile. “I see. Well, I’m going to read, and if you’d like to join me—”

Tommy would not. Tommy would literally rather be *anywhere* else, but when Wilbur comes back to the sofa with a book of folk tales in Northal he does his best to sneakily peer over the older boy's shoulder. If Wilbur takes a little longer to turn each page, well, that's on him. Tommy's not a slow reader for certain. And if Tommy gets more invested in each tale than he'd originally wanted to, well.

No one else is in his mind. Just him. Thank prime, because his thoughts are some of the traitorous sort right now and would land him deeply in trouble.

But it's just him and a broken gate, and the tendrils of an idea.

~~Dear Tubbo,~~

~~I might've made a mistake this afternoon—or... something. I don't know. I don't know anymore. I don't know. I don't—~~

"Hey," Tommy says. Karl the librarian jumps, startled.

"Oh!" he says, perking up. Then he takes in Tommy's expression and frowns. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Tommy reassures him. "The general and I are on equal ground, that's all. Prince and I too. Any new charts?"

"Not yet, little astronomer," Karl says apologetically. "You're eager. But we do have some new folk tales from the scribes up by Tantwell. Want to take a look?" This is a genuine question, and Tommy hesitantly follows him, turning over the crisp new pages of a book with fresh ink. The images are new and the letters happily pressed, and with care he turns through it. Folk tales, like Karl had said. *Prime*, he is going to be sick of them.

"Something?" Karl asks, voice slightly hushed. Tommy takes a breath, shoves down the rising hatred in his gut, and then nods.

"Past the place where they keep animals on the east side of the outer ring," he tells Karl quietly. "There's a knocked-in gate that Wilbur used to sneak us out into the fourth ward. It should still be open. Mark the passage of guards and you'll get right through no issue."

"Oh." Karl's lips are rounded, a hushed exclamation of surprise. He blinks, and then nods. "I'll— that's— thank you, your highness."

"Tell him I miss him," Tommy says, even quieter, an admission so soft it might not have been spoken at all. "Please."

"Always," Karl promises. His hand is warm on Tommy's, painted nails shining in the lantern light.

*Dear Tubbo,*

*I may be seeing you sooner than I thought.*

*Turns out, the Emperor is consolidating his power. You served on the diplomacy committee for a few months— was it enough to understand the complicated politics behind this? Because I sure don't fucking understand a lick of it.*

*Philza is going to do a tour of the Continent. Aka, he's leaving the Empire. To go to the Isles. And the Vaults, and Libra even. He's bringing his whole fucking family along with him, to show how happy and human and normal they are. All of them! And they were just going to leave me here, in the cold fucking snow, with no one but the court ladies to watch over me. Oh, and the entire guard too, but they're all little bitches and can't hold a sword to save their lives. Not as well as me, that is. 'Cause I'd kill them in a heartbeat, get it, to save their lives? Anyways, yeah. They were going to leave me alone.*

*Turn of events, though. Ho ho ho, beware, this tale isn't fucking done. Apparently, Prince Wilbur's been arguing to bring me with. He says I'm "well behaved" enough to do so, and used the fact that I didn't run away when we went out in the town to support it. To be fair, I did think about it. But it's too much of a pain, running away. We're too far north for me to properly get away. But that's not it either— turns out, Wilbur isn't the only one petitioning for me to come with. It was being discussed in front of me at dinner last night and fucking— get this, fucking get this!!!— **General Technoblade** vouched for me to go along with them. He made it clear I wouldn't be let out of his sight, of course, and I won't be going to the Isles, but I'll be able to follow along to the Vaults and Libra.*

*I'm coming to visit. For real. Philza is allowing it.*

*I'm leaving Raven's Flight when the snow starts to melt. As long as I don't do anything to lose this trust in the next few months I'll get out of this freezing fucking palace and get to explore a little bit. I can't remember the last time I was in the Vaults, much less Libra. We probably met at some point, thinking about it. Weird, innit? We existed in the same space and time and met, and now we're writing letters.*

*Not much else is new. The Empress of all people was against me leaving— I would've thought she'd be for it, but apparently fucking not. Rude. She gets to go see my city, my home, while I sit in her cold fucking palace and rot.*

*Sorry if I'm being pessimistic. There's not many places to vent here, except screaming out my window until I lose my voice. Top-tier coping by the way— I highly recommend it. The mountains are very good secret keepers.*

*This is getting too sappy for me. I'll cut our conversation short for the sake of myself. I've got dinner within the hour and I need to be presentable or else Kristin will have my fucking head. She's a right menace when you get down to it. Don't tell anyone I said that. Might be treason. Might not, though, either. They always just laugh whenever I say shit like that now.*



*Prime, stop me from fucking trauma-dumping. Hope you're well, Tubs. How are the talking boxes going? Did you try the adapter method? Get any more letters from Ranboo? Heard about your engagement party from Wilbur of all people. Disgusting, the both of you. You know I don't mean it. Better to be married to a friend than a stranger. Tell me how things are in your Underground city- I want to know everything before I get there! Please :D*

*Your Best Friend,*

*Tommy*

## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

and that's the end of arc 3. a little anticlimatic- or is it?

:)

see you in two weeks!

-

if you wanna support me and my endeavors, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc IV. - borrowed time

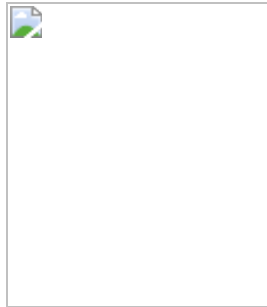
### Chapter Summary

tws: n/a

chapter beta'd by the wonderful tem/definitelynotshouting!!!! (who's just released an awesome fic you should check out)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Time passes like molasses in this dull cage of his.

It gets less dull, of course. Tommy finds routine once again, and time goes by in flitting, empty pieces. Candelights comes and goes. It snows the week before and stops halfway through the day itself, just in time for the city to celebrate. Tommy watches the festivities from afar and doesn't join them. He spends the night curled up in his bed, pretending like he's not crying.

Wilbur had offered for him to join them that night. Talked at length about presents, waxed poetic about tradition. Tommy had kicked him out and— what was it he had said, exactly? Ah, right. *Get out and piss off*. The prince had listened and no one had come to him that night. No hands had forcibly dragged him to the drawing room and made him participate. He's not sure whether or not he regrets it yet.

They don't let him go outside again. Wilbur doesn't suggest it, and Tommy doesn't dare bring it up. The apology they'd stuttered out, both disingenuous and not— it had been shaky at best and neither of them want to tip the boat now that they've settled into something regarding friendship on Tommy's good days.

He has a host of them. Days, that is. Good and bad ones alike, and some in between. His fragile respect of Technoblade and Wilbur means that good days often involve them: he spends hours lounging in the little spots of sun that come through the clouds, chatting with the prince; even more of which are spent sparring with the general. He's gotten rustier than he

had intended to with a sword, but he's back in shape sooner than later. And the exercise helps clear his mind— even without them there, Tommy will find his way to the atrium and do drills. The stretch is calming, the routine a balm over his frayed nerves. Nerves of which are particularly frayed by the presence of a certain married couple that Tommy tries his best to avoid. Mealtimes are impossible. Stiff and awkward conversation— sometimes no one talks at all. Tommy tries to take his meals alone when he can, but other times it's futile; he sits and he shoves food into his mouth and prays to Prime for it all to be over.

He goes to the sacrarium once a week. Wednesdays, actually. He sits and he prays, and he wishes for someone to come see him, someone to use the information he'd given Karl that fateful day that has been weeks ago now. The librarian never has news for him no matter how often Tommy goes and pleads, no matter how many letters of his own he sends.

Days turn into weeks, into a month. Two months. Tommy spends as much time with the royal family as he tries to spend alone, and Prime, he is so alone. He aches with it, an open maw in his gut that swallows him whole some days. Those days, he seeks out Wilbur and annoys him, pushes buttons and gets punished for it in turn. They never hit him. Philza scolds and Wilbur occasionally tugs his hair, but he does it whenever Tommy's good, too, so that's another thing. Wilbur's affection is strange, but Tommy revels in it when he can and always ends up coming away disgusted with himself for the desperation.

He's just waiting, now. Waiting for a punishment that may never come. Waiting for a sentencing, his trial for existing now completed as his kingdom struggles under Emperor Philza's lordship. He pretends not to see the reports (and it is a strange kind of relief that he doesn't have to work on those, but a strange kind of panic, too. It plays into the boredom most days. Tommy needs to work and he cannot and it is *miserable* ). Tommy is waiting, and time is passing, and the exile, the executioner's axe, *it never falls*.

Spring, of a sort.

In Caterwaul, spring always comes early. Warm air off the ocean would roll in across the farmland and heave monsoons over the city and coastline, down the rivers, sending waves upon waves of warm spring thunderstorms upon the limestone streets. Tommy *loved* the monsoon season. There was nothing like the rush of wind that came bearing rain, melting away whatever chill winter had left over. His favorite thing to do back home was open the windows all the way during a thunderstorm and let them soak the floors, sitting in the path of the droplets and letting himself get just as wet. It was a stupid, childish thing to do, but fuck if it wasn't fun. He loved sitting up in one of the palace towers, staring out over the city's rooftops and waiting patiently for lightning to come crashing down, attracted to the small metal rods that people established in order to keep fires from taking place. Spring in Caterwaul had marked a shift in the weather, a verifiable change. Something to mark the passage of time. Here there is nothing except endless grey.

One day, he and Wilbur are sitting in the drawing room. Wil's got more than a few sheets of music spread out around him— Tommy is drawing, sketching with charcoal as he lies on his stomach across the way. He much prefers the floor to the sofa. Wilbur mutters something in surprise and Tommy hardly looks up.

“What?” he asks, tipping his head and scratching out some more faint charcoal lines.

“It’s spring,” Wilbur says, sounding cheerful. “It’s the equinox. Happy Day of Saints.”

Tommy glances towards the window, where the sun is still hidden behind clouds that promise more snow. He has no basis to believe Wilbur in this– the day is like any other day, cold and dreary and miserable.

“Right,” he says. “Happy Day of Saints.”

Later, he checks Wilbur’s claim. Turns out the prince is right, and it is the equinox. Back home they will likely start feeling the weather turn, and yet as the days continue onwards in the north, little changes. It still feels like winter. It’s still cold and awful, and Tommy is more used to the chill now than he was before, but that doesn’t mean he likes it.

Nothing changes, until it does.

Tommy first spots the change when the servants start muttering more. They always mutter– it’s easy to tune them out, of course, but Tommy notices when it picks up. Then Wilbur becomes flighty. The palace is a hive of activity, people talking and chatting and things being passed back and forth. Tommy is left bereft for approximately two days (Technoblade is useless. The man also disappears on the second day, along with Wilbur, and no way in hell is Tommy asking Philza or Kristin. Philza for obvious reasons, Kristin because he’s sure she’d snitch). Then, on the third, the *entire* royal family disappears. All except Technoblade. Tommy wakes up one morning and they are simply gone– his questions fielded by the hulking general who is back to wearing his fatigues around the palace as if it’s normal.

“They’re heading to Osprey,” the general says with a small huff. Tommy follows behind, insistent, like a small bug. He imagines himself a mosquito. Tiny and buzzing and annoying, especially as Technoblade raises his hand and tries to wave him off. “Don’t fret. You’ll be following them soon enough.”

“No one tells me anything,” Tommy whines. “Wilbur didn’t even come to say goodbye.”

“Did you want him to?” Technoblade stops in front of the doors to the Great Hall, turning and eyeing Tommy with a look. Tommy shrinks back, then tries to puff out his chest and square his shoulders.

“Maybe,” he says. “He’s a bitch. But I would’ve liked to tell him that to his face.”

“You’ll see him in a few weeks. Send a letter if you’re desperate,” Techno tells him, then pushes the doors to the Hall open. Tommy follows even now– the general is busy with his work and finishing some things up in the palace, and Tommy is being allowed to watch for now. He takes a minute as they enter the Hall; he hasn’t been in here since the ball before his surrender, and the ceilings are just as high and arching and pretentious as the last time he saw them. Technoblade continues along and Tommy has to jog to catch up after a minute– their footsteps click and mingle on the great floors, echoing high above. There is a spattering of guards and servants milling about; when the two of them enter, most come to attention. “Speaking of Wilbur,” Techoblade says, and he turns, suddenly facing Tommy head-on. “He left behind something for you.”

“Something?” Tommy asks, getting on his tiptoes to survey the hall. Nothing seems very present-like. Wilbur liked giving Tommy presents. Ever since their first outing in the Fourth Ward and the silver earrings, he’d gifted Tommy more than a few other things. Clothing, made by hand by the tailor and traditionally northern. Small carvings, child’s toys, books. Lots of books. Tommy let the toys pile up (he’s not four) but the books he takes without argument. Reading has become a treasured pastime, along with sketching, doing drills, and going on walks with Wilbur around the entirety of the palace (he likes to think he knows the layout fairly well by now. There are parts he still gets confused in, of course, but the domestic wing he knows).

“Someone,” Technoblade amends. He gestures, and out from one of the guard crowds comes—

A boy. Blond, similar in stature to Tommy. His face is sharper, leaner than Tommy’s, and instead of blue his eyes are purple. He looks familiar.

But Tommy doesn’t have time to ruminate on that. The boy keeps his eyes turned down, demure as Technoblade talks. “Wilbur hand-picked him from the squires. His name is Alexei, and he will be your companion for the next few weeks while I work on getting us to Libra. He’ll keep you company on the trip as well. We leave in a fortnight.”

“Wilbur got me a babysitter?” Tommy is quick to complain, because he can see right through the lies. Companion his ass, this is someone sent to *spy* on him. The boy’s face hardly twinges. Tommy stares at him in abject horror. “I’m not going to cause *trouble*. I don’t need someone to watch me!”

“You do,” Techno says, voice impossibly fond. Tommy glares at him. He refuses to bend to the will of these monsters. A hand lands in his hair and turns him towards the squire (who Tommy swears he’s seen before, what the hell, it’s on the tip of his tongue) and Technoblade nudges him forward. “Say hello, and play nice. Squire, you have permission to wallop him if he’s rude.”

“Duly noted, sir,” the squire says, and Tommy can just barely see the smile tugging on his lips. He opens his mouth to retort, to say something vicious and hot and mean, but then he pauses.

He *does* know where he saw this boy before. In the square, a month and a half ago, with Wilbur. They’d been surrounded by armor and guards, but Tommy remembers.

When he tunes back in from his shock, Technoblade is speaking. “—end the rest of your day in the domestic wing. Or the atrium, if you please. Go on, then. I’ve got things to do that can’t include you, pup. State secrets.”

“Fuck you,” Tommy says pleasantly, and Techno releases his head with a scoffing laugh before turning to go. Tommy listens as the clank of his armor and footsteps gets fainter with distance, and before long, disappears entirely as he leaves the room. Around them, guards and servants scuttle back to whatever they had been doing before. Not many of them hold the same respect they once would’ve for Tommy. He keeps his eyes on the boy in front of him, who immediately lifts his head once the general is gone and locks eyes with him— just

another example of how his status has changed. They stand there for a moment, and then the boy side-eyes the rest of the servants and nods gently.

“The atrium, your Grace?” He asks. His voice is soft and accented the way all Librans tend to speak, unused to the new languages after centuries of being isolated.

“Sure,” Tommy says, and they go.

Alexei is quiet as they walk. People are staring still, and Tommy almost feels bad for the kid as they attract attention from all manner of servants. But it’s still something nagging at him—he’d seen this kid in the square before, dressed in purple finery. Maybe he was the son of some Libran noble? Coming to the Empire for greater glories? But that seems stupid, and there’s another thing; as they walk, Tommy cannot hear him. The other boy is entirely silent, no puff of breath and no footsteps echoing down the halls. It’s like he’s being followed by a ghost, pale hair and empty eyes. Neither of them talk. It’s painfully awkward. The warmth of the atrium (usually comforting) is oppressive when they enter, but Tommy doesn’t hesitate to strip off his woolen sweater, the thick blue embroidery elegant and ostentatious in his grasp. He looks at Alexei and grimaces—no wonder the other boy is regarding him with a disinterested look in his eye. Tommy probably looks spoiled to all hell and back.

“So,” Tommy says, navigating the path with ease as they meander further into the trees. “Uh. I saw you before, didn’t I?”

“Huh.” Alexei snorts, and it’s the first real sort of emotion Tommy’s seen from him yet. “Didn’t think you’d remember.”

“Of course I *remembered*,” Tommy says disdainfully, tipping his nose up. “I’m not an arse.”

“That’s not what most people tend to say about you,” Alexei tells him, sticking a finger out and pointing it at him distrustfully. Tommy scowls.

“I am sick and tired of hearing what other people have to say about me,” he grumbles, tucking his arms around his middle, but keeping an eye on the other boy. “It’s all bullshit, anyways. Rumors ‘n crap.”

“You know,” Alexei says, “in the squire quarters, there’s *rumors* of dissent against the emperor.”

Tommy turns to look at him fully now. The birds chirp high in the branches above them, and it hits him then— they are utterly alone. He’s too quick to trust. He can hear it in Dream’s voice even now, after months without seeing him. Too quick to trust, too easy to get to. Although, Technoblade wouldn’t have sent someone untrustworthy with him, would he? Maybe to spy. Maybe—

“That’s stupid,” Tommy says quietly. “The empire will crush it under their boot, just like everything else.”

Alexei picks at his nails, the picture of boredom, and Tommy’s scowl deepens. “I dunno,” he says. “Seemed like pretty crazy rumors to me.”

“Why would I care?” Tommy asks, turning around and facing away again, pretending like this isn’t some sort of fucked up test Technoblade has bestowed upon him.

“Just thought you might,” Alexei tells him, and Tommy forges onwards, towards the dusty sparring circle and the grass field surrounding it. He breaks into the sunlight, tipping his head up. “People are apparently still loyal to *you* out there, your highness.”

He snaps his head back. The boy is watching him from the treeline, and Tommy swallows after a second.

“Is your name really Alexei?” he asks after a moment. The boy shakes his head, and his shoulders slump a bit. “Well? What is it, then?”

“Alexei never left his bed a fortnight ago,” the boy says, and Tommy blinks, but he forges on despite it. “I took his place. Trusted enough, I guess. You can call me Purpled.”

“That’s not a name,” Tommy notes. “That’s a color.”

“Fuck you,” Purpled says jovially, stepping out from the trees into the sun. “If she doesn’t wake?”

“She dreams,” Tommy finishes, and nearly collapses with relief. “Oh, Prime, wait— does this—”

“Karl told us about the gate,” Purpled says with a sideways smile, something lurking behind it, vicious and full of mischief. “It took a while, but your good advisor hired me and a couple others and we got through. There’s a number of us here, now. Watching. Waiting.”

“That’s not creepy whatsoever,” Tommy says, and he scuffs at the dirt with his feet. “Can I go out with you? See Dream? Is that—”

“Nope,” Purpled drawls. He sticks his hands into his pockets— he’s being terribly informal, and Tommy finds he doesn’t care, not one bit. It’s kind of a relief to speak so freely, although he’s listening for anyone entering the room as well. Just in case. “They were so worried about you getting out they forgot to watch for people coming in. I think the Empire’s spread a bit thin at the moment.”

“I think they are too,” Tommy agrees with no small amount of relief. He’s not sure what Alexei’s— no, Purpled’s presence means just yet, but it must mean something. And what had he said? A number of people are in the palace as they speak— watching. Waiting. For what? For Tommy to know? For him to just figure it out? Or are they just getting footholds in the door without raising suspicion? He has so many questions and he’s not sure how long they’ll have, so he opens his mouth to ask, but—

“Save your questions,” Al— Purpled tells him, raising a hand and shaking his head lightly. “I don’t know any of the answers. I’m just another middle man.”

“But Dream,” Tommy says, and the boy in front of him raises one thick brow. “I need to see him, then. Is that possible? Can you tell me anything? How many people are there, what

they're planning, how do I—"

"I thought you'd be quieter, honestly," Purpled says, cutting him off with a snort of laughter. Tommy snaps his mouth shut with a click, teeth rattling against one another as he stares at him, then huffs.

"Fuck off," he tells him. "I'm— it's been months with no word, ex- *cuse* me for wanting a little information."

"You're excused," Purpled says slyly. "How many guards are outside your room at night?"

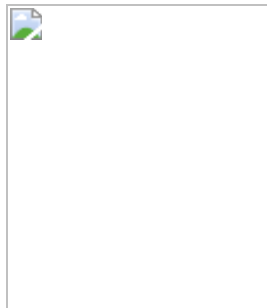
"Two." It had been one, before, when Tommy had not posed a threat to the Empire by virtue of his age and stature, but after the incident with the kitchens and the guard found sleeping outside his room, it had been upped to two. They're always alert, too— sometimes, Tommy pokes his head outside the door to see if there might be a repeat of that one fated night, but they never are. Purpled hums.

"And I'm sure they take their meal before..." he says, trailing off and staring into space. He nods once, sharply, and then snaps his gaze to Tommy with that lazy smile. "Tonight, leave your room once the moon has cleared the top of the mountains. The General's got his hands full running the palace on his own— we'll have a few hours, no more."

"Where will we go?" Tommy asks.

"To someone who can answer your questions," Purpled tells him, and well. There's only one person who can do that.

Dream.



Night comes, and Tommy watches the sky as the stars creep out, indigo streaks painting a picture on the horizon. The craggy cliff sides are brilliantly white in the light of the moon, snow reflecting out into the valley of Crow's Chasm and right into Tommy's room. The moonlight is bright, beaming out across the wood of his floor and coating his door in the pale color. When Tommy follows it, the silver handle glints when turned, and outside, his two guards are motionless. He opens the door further— waves a hand in front of their faces, chests moving up and down slowly under their armor, faces slack.

"Asleep," someone says, and Tommy jumps. Across the hall, Purpled peels himself away from the wall and melts into existence. He's sneaky. Tommy hadn't even noticed he was there at first.



“Drugged,” Tommy corrects. Purpled shrugs.

“They’ll wake up eventually,” he says, then nods down the hall. “Hurry. We don’t have much time.”

Tommy doesn’t even want to know what would happen if they were caught. Quietly, like two mice in the night, they skitter and scurry their way down to the kitchens. Still dark, empty, Purpled constantly going ahead of Tommy to clear their route. The other boy is practiced, footsteps silent despite his boots, and Tommy wonders what he actually is. Surely not a squire.

The kitchens are warm, that grandfather oak door with the eye-like knots staring him down. Purpled does not hesitate, turning the handle and letting in a blast of chill air. Tommy looks down the stone steps and then at the other boy, swallowing hard.

“You’re not going to kill me, right?” He jokes as the door swings shut behind them, plunging the staircase into darkness. A moment later something *snaps!* and a cold hand presses a small ceramic tile into his own. He traces his fingers over it, the darkness suffocating around them both, and Purpled presses the tile harder into his palm. Tommy can recognize the symbol and a second later, breaks the tile in two. Suddenly, as though the ceiling had gone transparent, he can see. It’s like the whole world is awash in pale light, the night vision effect taking hold as the magic leeches from the tile into his body.

“You’re asking me that now?” Purpled asks, and Tommy can see his incredulous face now. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Watch it,” Tommy says, and they carefully pick their way down the steps and Purpled lifts a finger to his lips. They’re silent as he pushes open the next door, Purpled sticking his head out into the inner ring and then motioning for Tommy to follow. It’s brighter out here— with the rune tile taking effect, magic warm on his palms, the place is as bright as it would be in the day (and dreadfully chilly. Tommy shivers, glad for his foresight to not change into pajamas tonight). “I’m your king,” he whispers, trying and failing to not sound too pretentious. It obviously shines through— Purpled just laughs.

“No one is my king,” he says as they head across the way, towards the tall outer wall that is the barrier between the palace, the courtyards, and government buildings outside it in the outer ring. But before they reach it, Purpled turns, and they head along the wall instead of directly to it. Tommy follows, trying to keep his footsteps quiet as they travel back towards the barnyards, the baying and stink of animals making themselves known as they approach. Tommy pauses for just a moment beside the pen of cows, reaching out as one lazily lifts its head, feet curled underneath it. But then Purpled is giving his arm a small tug, and he continues on.

There’s a shed ahead of them— it’s a small wooden box, basically, the roof slanted to keep the snow from piling up, the walls barely held together by nails and latches. The door is shut, but in between the cracks in the walls Tommy can see the faint glow of a lantern (not that they’d need it, but). As they approach, the door swings open.

“Haunted,” someone calls out.

“Marionette,” Purpled replies quietly. At Tommy’s look, he shrugs. “A call and response. We change them pretty consistently.”

“You can come in,” says the voice, and Tommy doesn’t recognize it, or the man it’s coming from. He looks like Purpled but taller, scruffier, clothing more suited for the cold than Purpled’s is. His hair is also blond if not a little darker, and a chain sits around his neck with a glistening gem in the center of it. He’s watching Tommy with a neutral expression, pupils dilated in the dark.

“Thanks, Punz,” Purpled says, and they flit past the man and into the shed.

The lantern light grows brighter as they enter, the small interior bright with how it casts over the walls and door. There’s a long counter against one of the walls, a few bales of hay in the opposite corner of the door, and some buckets and tools leaning against the walls. But that’s not what catches Tommy’s attention, no— there’s another person in the shed, tucked up and sitting on the hay bales. When Tommy comes in, they stand, and for a second he’s unsure.

Dream looks different. His hair is dark now, eyes still green but less sharp. His face is gaunt and pale, lined with stress and worry, but as Tommy walks in and they lock eyes, some of that tension melts from his face.

“Tommy,” he breathes, opening his arms. Purpled ducks to the side and Tommy has a straight line towards the older man— he takes the opportunity, darting forward and slamming into Dream’s chest.

And then he’s six again. On a throne too big for him, wearing a crown that’s too heavy and makes his neck ache. He has nightmares about the advisors and only cries when no one is looking. He’s a well-behaved kid who has a tendency to get loud and passionate, and whenever he needs a hug, Dream is there. Dream, who teaches him how to write with a gentle hand and brutal efficiency. Dream, whose arms wrap around him tightly and gather him close to his chest, close enough to hear the beating of his heart as they stand there. A planet and moon, constantly orbiting one another until finally, at last, they collide.

“Dream,” Tommy whispers into his older brother’s— fuck that they’re not biologically related, fuck it, they’d cut their palms and mixed their blood they are *brothers* — neck, voice filled with desperation and aching longing to stay. He knows he can’t. He knows it is just tonight, but fuck, he can pretend.

“I’ve been so worried,” Dream murmurs into his hair, a hand coming up to cup the back of his head and smoothing down his frazzled curls. It’s so long— he can drag it through his fingers, combing through, and every ounce of tension in Tommy’s muscles melt as he sags against him. “Karl tells me how you are, but I just—”

“I missed you,” Tommy whispers right back, cutting him off and clinging tighter. “Dream, I’ve— I’m—”

“Shh,” Dream mutters, and pulls back. Tommy resists the urge to protest, but he doesn’t go far; just pulls away, keeping an arm around Tommy’s shoulder as his free hand comes around

the front of his head, running a thumb under his eye and cupping his cheek. “Prime, you look so tired. What have they done to you?”

“Nothing,” Tommy promises. “Nothing bad, I promise. I’m okay.”

“It’s been months since the ball,” Dream counters. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” Tommy promises him. “I’m— I’m good. Are you? You look—” *Like shit*. “... tired.”

“I am tired,” Dream admits, tipping his head. Behind them, the door has shut, but Tommy doesn’t fucking care. He stays where he is, right in Dream’s arms, the warmth of his weight comforting in a way nothing has been since the siege. “But you needed this.”

“We’re leaving the Empire,” Tommy tells him. “In two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” Dream raises a brow, finally dragging his eyes away from Tommy’s face and up, over his head. “That’s not a lot of time.”

“We’ll figure it out.” It’s the man’s voice again, and Dream nods, glancing back down at Tommy.

“This is Punz,” he says, and Tommy glances over his shoulder briefly. The man nods— Tommy nods back. “He and Purpled are from Libra. They’re helping me.”

“George and Sapnap?” Tommy asks.

“In the city.” Dream laughs, an exasperated, exhausted huff of air. “We didn’t want to risk too many people sneaking into the palace. We’re not even sure how long the broken gate will go unnoticed.”

“As long as I can keep them on their toes, forever,” Tommy promises. “Though, if we’re leaving, won’t it be easier to see me?”

“Theoretically,” Dream murmurs, and his hand is in Tommy’s hair again. “You’ve gotten taller.”

“No, you’ve just gotten shorter,” Tommy fires back, and it’s worth it to see how Dream smiles. “I’m okay. Seriously.”

“I just worry,” Dream says. “Those *animals* .”

“Don’t worry,” Tommy reassures him. “I’m doing what I can. And, speaking of. Purpled said you had a plan? Or something was going on? Dissent?”

Dream’s face creases and he again glances over the top of Tommy’s head. Tommy follows his gaze to Punz and Purpled, the younger of which has hoisted himself up onto the counter and now sits, kicking his feet. At Dream’s look, his feet still, and then he slides off the counter.

“Can you give us a minute?” Dream asks. Purpled’s face scrunches up.

“We’re just going to listen to you guys from outside,” he points out as Punz moves towards the door, ducking as the older boy reaches out and cuffs him lightly on the head. “Ow! I’m just being honest! The walls aren’t even *walls* , they’re just boards.”

“The illusion of privacy would be nice,” Dream drawls, and Purpled begrudgingly moves to the door, the chill air from outside seeping in as it opens, and then closes. “And keep watch.” Tommy looks to Dream, watching as the stern expression fades to something more tired as they go. After a second, he turns his gaze back to Tommy, his eyes softening just a tad.

“You sure you’re alright?” he asks, and something in Tommy snaps, ever so slightly.

“No,” he admits, “no, of course I’m not *fucking* alright, Dream. I’ve been miserable. I’ve been— lost.”

“Lost?” Dream prompts, and Tommy frowns, shuts his eyes. The darkness is pale, but it’s there.

“It’s like I’m drowning,” he admits quietly. “I have no purpose in their palace. Nothing to do, no one to trust. It’s like I can’t swim through it all, or like it’s oil or something. It’s fuckin’ clingy, is what it is, Dream. The shit I’m swimming through. I miss being home. I miss—” Being king. He does, in some strange way. Even when the responsibility had been heavy, it had been constant. Something he could lean on. He swallows hard. “Without it,” he says, barely a whisper, “I don’t think I’m anything at all.”

“Then why do they keep you around?” Dream murmurs, his hand sliding from the top of Tommy’s head to his cheek, cradling it. “Since apparently you’re not of use to them.”

“Power play?” Tommy suggests, and he cracks his eyes open to a pleased look on Dream’s face, so he must’ve gotten the answer right. “They want a legitimate claim to my throne.”

“One reason of many,” Dream says, and his fingers tighten until the pressure on his cheekbone is nearly uncomfortable. “Good to know they haven’t drained away what little self-awareness I managed to drill into you.”

“What?” Tommy asks, skin shifting oddly under Dream’s fingers. His brother cracks a smile, and his grip loosens.

“Nothing,” Dream says lightly. “I’m just joking with you. Lighten up. You looked so happy to see me just a minute ago.”

“I *am* happy to see you,” Tommy argues, butting his cheek into Dream’s hand even as he draws it away. The older boy had always liked it when he’d chased affection like that, cooing over him and making sure everyone was watching as he’d preened over his kingly little brother. “The happiest.”

“Then keep asking me questions like the eager little brat I know you are,” Dream says with a grin, and the mood lightens just a bit as Tommy smiles back. Serious talk aside— well, there’s always going to be serious talk, but he can at least ask about his other friends.

"Tell me everything," Tommy says quietly, unlatching himself from Dream's side but keeping close enough to feel his radiating warmth. "Please. About everyone."

Dream sighs. "There's not much to tell," he admits, moving to sit on the hay bales like he had been when they'd entered. Tommy sits beside him, the straw poking against his legs as he does, sharp and biting. "It's— I've arranged for some supporters of your right to the crown to join me here in Raven's Flight. Sapnap, George and I, we've been living in the Second Ward since we got here, in a basement. Working odd jobs— George, mostly."

"His potions." Tommy nods, thinking of George and his skills with alchemy. It's a valuable trade, one they can peddle alongside Sapnap's magic tricks. "They get you by? I can—" he thinks of his jewelry up in his room, glimmering, expensive. "I can help you, if you need it."

"I've got some leftover things from the treasury, too. We're okay," Dream reassures, reaching out and taking Tommy's hand. "We're alive. And you're alive. Which is good."

"It is," Tommy nods. "It is good." They both stand there, and Tommy stares down at their intertwined fingers and then up once more at Dream's face. "So... what's the plan now? We're alive. We've got to have a plan, yeah?" He watches his expression, a realization starting to form as Dream's lips thin, as he stays quiet. "Right?"

"Well. No," Dream admits. "There is no plan, at the moment."

"What?" Tommy shoots up to his feet again, the dirt floor steady under them as he whirls around to face his advisor, most trusted mentor. "What do you mean, there is no plan?? There's *got* to be a plan! There has to be! There's— we can't just lie down and accept defeat, that's not an option. The Dream *I* know would never let that be an option!"

"Tommy," Dream says, still holding tight to his fingers. "Tommy, please, quiet—"

Tommy lowers his voice to a hushed, upset whisper as emotions broil in his stomach. "There can't be no plan at all," he says. "Purpled said there was dissent."

"In one or two soldiers, sure," Dream concedes. "Not enough to build anything substantial like an army."

"So we change their minds!" Tommy says. "Maybe— maybe we don't *need* an army."

Dream's eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

Tommy turns the idea over in his mind— it's the idea he always comes back to, in the end. When the anger is cold and quiet instead of fiery and loud, the plan more calculating and terrible than anything else. Perhaps Philza would be expecting an uprising of peasants, or maybe a campaign launched by Tommy himself. But he wouldn't expect something closer to home, not with how Tommy's made himself small in their palace.

"A coup," he says. The room is frozen, and Dream goes very, very still.

"Tommy," Dream says a second later, "The people would *hate* you. A coup? The citizens of the Empire, they don't like you, and they love their emperor."

Tommy thinks back— to Clara's disgust, the matron's sharp eyes. He knows this. But he also knows the people still starving after the scarce winter would be desperate for a leader.

"So we make them like me enough," he says. "And pin it on someone else." Dream raises a brow.

"And you swoop in during the aftermath," he says carefully. "That's a lot of moving parts. Besides, who would we even blame?"

Tommy takes a breath, looking down at the floor, unseeing. It's a terrible thought; a horrible idea, really, but Dream is waiting and he needs to get out of here before long. He takes a breath, sets his shoulders square and looks his brother in the eye. "The crown prince isn't interested in the idea of being emperor," he says. "The advisors don't know him. Not well. His own father disregards him. It's not hard to imagine that anger might build until he does something terrible to his family."

Dream watches him, eyes sharp and dangerous, but gleaming. Slowly, a smile creeps across his face and encompasses it whole, and Tommy grins back as he stalks forward and pinches his cheek, giving Tommy's face a small shake. "You rat bastard," he says with a choked laugh. "You devious little king." Tommy grins harder, even as the fingers on his face sting.

"Is that you agreeing?" Tommy asks, and Dream lets go of his face and pulls him into another hug, warm and safe. Tommy giggles.

"It's something," he says, and Tommy's chest swells with hope. "It's an idea. I'll see what I can gather from my contacts. You need to get back to the palace, though. If we're going to stage a coup, we need someone on the inside."

"I'm right here," Tommy says, spreading an arm out. "Hello. Plus Karl."

"The people still don't like you," Dream points out. "The advisors might let you in, but would the public?"

"I'm about to leave," Tommy points out. "This trip, it's about forging relationships."

Dream nods. "So you gain some allies while away, and show the populace your good nature and kind face."

Tommy nods right back, shrugging slightly. "It might work."

"You'd have to put on a show," Dream says, and he starts to pace— he's always paced when thinking, and now Tommy can see that spark in his eyes once more. His brother had looked so tired when Tommy had arrived, but now he looks *alive*. "Stop eating as much, look a bit too thin for your age. Dress up however the Empire wants you to dress up. Be kind, be pious, and pay attention to the people. Allude to the royal family's treatment of you but never be entirely forthcoming about it. Make friends."

"I have friends," Tommy thinks, and— Tubbo and Ranboo, their eyes, their letters, bright and shining in his mind.

“You’d have to be backed *entirely* by the Vaults and Libra for this to work,” Dream says harshly, shaking his head. “No, it’s too—”

“I can make them back me,” Tommy says. “I can.” They lock eyes and Dream falters in his pacing, inhaling deeply for one long moment.

“Trust me,” Tommy pleads, and Dream exhales.

“If you say so,” he says. “I can get people here, to Raven’s Flight while you’re away. Contacts from the Isles, noble supporters. And when you return, we’ll have a whole summer to plan.”

“We could do this,” Tommy says, and Dream runs a hand through his hair, a maniacal little laugh escaping him.

“It’s crazy,” he says. “It’s insane, Tommy.”

“And we could do it.” Tommy is firm, because he believes it. Wholeheartedly, with his entire chest, he believes they could do it. It might take time, but it has been months already—Tommy has nothing but time. And it’s beginning to seem like the Emperor’s might be borrowed.

Dream is looking at him, eyes glinting, and he straightens. Tommy straightens up in return and they *look* at each other, green eyes meeting blue.

“I am so fucking proud of you,” Dream tells him softly. Tommy’s heart swells.

“For planning to—” Tommy lowers his voice. “—murder a king?” he asks, and Dream laughs again. His arms open and Tommy is quick to duck into them, wrapping his own around Dream’s chest as they stand there and rock in the middle of this barn shed.

Knuckles rap against the wood, piercing and sharp.

“Are you two done?” someone asks, the door creaking a bit. “Can we come back in? It’s cold as balls out here.”

“Sure,” Dream says, sounding gleeful above Tommy’s head. “I’m assuming you were listening.”

“We were,” Punz says, appearing in the light as the door opens once more. Tommy pulls away from Dream as the two enter (he wonders if they’re brothers, or if they’re like how he and Dream are— they look similar enough to be blood siblings, surely?) and Purpled rubs his hands together, the tips visibly red and stiff. “You think it’s a good idea?”

“No,” Dream admits. “It’s a stupid idea. Risky. And if we fail, we die.”

“So you’re all for it,” Punz says, rolling his eyes.

“Of course I am,” Dream says smoothly. “It’s putting Tommy back in his rightful place on the throne. It’s a power move. If we can get away with this, we’ll have the Continent in our palm.

*Power .”*

A flat, open expanse of power. Tommy’s never really been all that intrigued by the feeling of it; he’s grown up with the heavy weight of responsibility on his head, and that responsibility is birthed from said authority. But the way Dream says it – the way it sticks on his tongue and then slinks it’s way into the open air, a floating snowflake of cool, promising command. Dream says the word like he already owns it, a hand on the back of his neck, a smile just behind his left temple and a pledge whispered into the shell of his ear. Even Tommy is convinced.

Punz’s expression falls neutral. Beside him, Purpled crosses his arms. The silence is deafening.

“... And money,” Dream tags on, as if he’s dangling a particularly tantalizing treat in front of a stubborn dog.

Punz’s expression falters, and then after a second, Purpled’s arms fall. He shrugs.

“Welp,” he says, holding out his hand to shake on it. “I’m convinced.”

Tommy resists the urge to stifle a laugh as Dream reaches forward, shaking Purpled’s hand securely and then, a moment later, Punz’s.

“We won’t be implied if things go to shit?” Punz asks, raising a brow. Dream shakes his head.

“I’ll have it all covered.”

“Besides,” Tommy pipes up. “It won’t go to shit.”

“Contingency plans are helpful to have anyways,” Punz informs him with that same stoic look, hand dropping from Dream’s. “Your Highness.”

“Tommy,” Tommy corrects quietly, and then gives a slow nod. Yeah. Tommy sounds better than that coming from this hired man’s mouth. “We’re equals, here.”

“Speaking of contingency plans,” Dream says. “We’ll have some things we need to put into place while you’re gone, Tommy. How long will the trip be?”

“A few weeks,” he says with a shrug, thinking about their plans. He knows the royal family is heading to visit the Isles right now, or are already there. The days blend together– it’s been a week since they left– right? Who knows. He shrugs again. “I go to Libra first, and then the Vaults, and then we return here.”

“I’ll be accompanying him to Libra,” Purpled pipes up. “Royal orders.”

“So Punz and I will be here, then,” Dream nods, and Tommy can see the calculations and ideas forming in his mind’s eye. “Good. A few weeks, and then the summer with you here to plan, and some allies you gained along the way. Remember what I said. Evoke pity, but be sure of yourself.”



“Yes, Dream,” Tommy murmurs, and they all fall silent.

“So this is it, then,” Purpled says a second later. His face is serious— even his tone, which had been sarcastic and monotonous a moment ago— is now solemn. “We’re doing it.”

“We are,” Dream nods. His hand lands on Tommy’s shoulder, and it’s warm, so warm. His family is here. “Tommy, you should return to your room. I don’t want to take unnecessary risks.”

Disappointment hits him like a stone to the eye. “Oh, but Dream,” he pleads, turning slightly to peer up at the older man. “Can’t I stay a little bit longer? Please? I just—”

“Tommy,” Dream says, and it’s the tone that you’re not supposed to argue with. “We didn’t have much time as it was. It’s been an hour or so now. Too long. Purpled, take him back?”

“Dream—”

“Enough, Tommy.” A flash of movement, and the hand that was on his shoulder is now on the back of his neck, two nudging fingers forcing him to look upwards and meet his green gaze. Distantly, Tommy thinks they’re not the right shade to match the emeralds the royal family of the Empire wears. Too dark compared to the gems. “I said no unnecessary risks.” And then, like butter in the warm summer air, Dream’s frozen tone melts. “I’ll miss you too. I know. But it’ll be okay. You’ll see us again before you know it.”

“Promise me,” Tommy demands.

“Don’t be a baby,” Dream tells him, but he lets go of the back of Tommy’s neck and holds a hand out. Gently, Tommy lays his own palm against his brother’s, their matching scars aligning for a brief moment. It makes him feel impossibly warm. “Go. We will be in touch.”

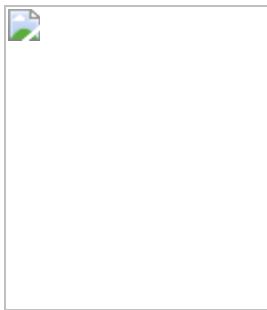
“Bye,” Tommy whispers, and then there’s another hand on his arm as Purpled tugs him gently away and out into the cold.

After the warmth of that small shed, lit with a lantern and heated by their bodies, the outside is freezing. Every spot where Dream had touched him burns, even after Purpled leaves him outside his room with the still-drugged guards, when Tommy has curled up in his too-big bed and pulled his knees to his chest, the yellow quilt pale in the moonlight. He watches it shift with the rise and fall of his own chest, the rhythm of his breathing, and thinks.

They’re going to kill the Emperor. Philza, with his stupid blond hair and bags under his eyes, the man who had stood in front of Tommy’s throne and demanded a surrender. He thinks of his guards bleeding out by the throat, and then replaces their face with the Emperor’s. It’s a vicious, secretive kind of revenge, but his stomach flips with giddiness whenever he imagines it.

Yes. They’ll kill him, and Tommy will be king once more, home and safe in his palace in Caterwaul. He’ll be able to watch the white sails of the ships as they come in the morning, smell the salt and hear the creaking of carts and pallet boards alike. He’ll see spring.

Content with memories of home, he's not sure when he drifts off to sleep.



They start preparing to leave the next day.

Traveling is exhausting. And after a day or two of running the palace on his own, Technoblade realizes that Tommy is used to occasionally being in charge as well, the fucking prick. So he gives him a few simple tasks to complete in order to lighten the load off himself, something he explains at a quick breakfast in the painfully empty drawing room. Tommy stares at the general's face over his oatmeal and imagines it coated in blood, and agrees to whatever the man asks of him.

In the end, it's all simple. Some of the rooms require cleaning and Tommy delegates those chores to staff people, making sure to be as polite and accommodating as possible. He recalls what Dream had said— connect with the people, make them sympathetic towards you. Let them see how good of a king you can be. And so Tommy decides to get a head start on that particular goal, gently but firmly commanding the staff as the palace prepares to see their General off. A lord will be in his stead; Sophie, they said her name was, and Tommy meets them one day in the courtyard as he oversees the distribution of goods to carriage.

“The melt will make the roads muddy,” he is telling one of the footmen, a younger boy who has probably never left the cobbled streets of Raven's Flight. “We had the same problem in Caterwaul when the monsoons hit. Send these off and put on the bigger wheels.”

“An astute observation, your Grace,” someone says beside him and Tommy jumps— he expects Purpled (or Alexei, as he refers to him when they're in the palace)-- but he finds a shorter lord instead, her hair wild and face round with a smile. “Strange that the General didn't notice himself.”

“He's busy,” Tommy informs the lord Sophie, because he had seen them before, walking side-by-side with Techno and talking at length. “I don't mind doing what I can.”

“I'm just glad to see you know what you're doing,” the lord says, and Tommy feels his brows curling together as she nods her head and then departs, skirts rustling across the paved cobbles of the courtyard and disappearing into the side hall.

And that's the last he sees of the Lord Sophie Texas before they leave, because before he knows it, it has been two weeks of frigid chill and furious planning, and Tommy is making sure his trunk is strapped tightly to a carriage before clambering into it himself.

“Funny,” Techno remarks as he climbs in beside Tommy. “Last time you were in one of these, you didn’t have a trunk.”

“Don’t be a fucking asshole about it,” Tommy spits back, crossing his arms and immediately tucking his feet up onto the seat. It’s a shorter ride from Raven’s Flight to Libra than it is to the Isles— only a few days, compared to a week or two. “Shut up and read a book or something.”

“I’ll only be in here until we’re out of the city,” Techno promises, propping his elbow on the door and leaning his chin into his palm, peering outside. He raises his other hand and raps the back of his seat— a second later, the carriage lurches into motion. “Then I’ll be out there on horseback for the most part. You’re welcome to join me at any time.”

“And freeze my arse off? No thanks,” Tommy murmurs, running his thumb over a small section of his embroidered jacket. His mittens lay to the side, tugged off in favor of fidgeting. The clatter of stones under the carriage wheels draws his attention, and he soon joins Techno in peering out the small cabin window, watching as the streets go from open to narrower, the high pampered buildings of the Fourth Ward, to smaller, then even smaller. Lavish turns to modest turns to poverty, and then they are on a main stretch of flat road and the gates are open ahead of them. No horns sound to mark their passage through the gates— they just leave, piles of snow on either side of the road, memories of the snowstorms that had plagued them the months before. Tommy stares out into the mud and melted snow and piles of slush and horse shit, twirling a lock of his hair absently as he looks out and watches the blue-tipped peaks of the ridge that makes up the western wall of the chasm get smaller and smaller as they go. The palace, too. Once they’re on the road, Tommy can see it properly.

His prison looks so small from afar.

It feels good to be leaving it behind.

“We’ll be back before long,” Techno says, interpreting Tommy’s thoughtful gaze likely as something else. He thinks about Dream— he thinks about their basement house, him, George, and Sapnap, and how he cannot wait to get back. Returning to Raven’s Flight means one step closer to getting revenge.

But for now, Tommy just hums back at Techno, quiet. He’ll keep his thoughts to himself.

Outside, the countryside rolls on, and Raven’s Flight disappears from their view.

## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

oooOOoOOOoOOOOOOOOOOO

THE PLOT THICKENS!!!!

in other news i might be releasing chapters bi-weekly, idk. we'll see!  
regardless, when i do update, it will be fridays at noon :D

merry christmas to those who celebrate! i can't believe i hit 100k with this fic- it's insane. i hope this is a good gift from me to you :) enjoy your holidays!

-

if you wanna support me and my endeavors, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc IV. - just business

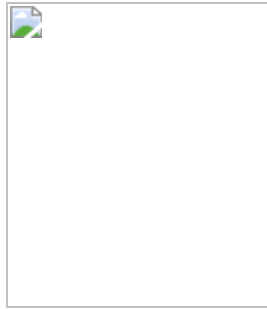
### Chapter Summary

tws: n/a!

chapter beta'd by the wonderful tem/definitelynotshouting!!!! (who's just released an awesome fic you should check out)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



When Schlatt had been younger, the world had been whole.

Things changed, of course– that’s something important he’d learned, was that things would always change. A political landscape, shifting and squirming alongside the natural flow of the universe. And with politics came business, and with the business came money. And people followed the money, and power followed the people.

A cycle, if you will. The world is made up of cycle after cycle, and Schlatt’s been lucky enough to recognize the signs when he sees them. It started after the Cataclysm, when the mountains surrounding Libra had fallen and land routes had opened up. People had flooded in and out, and tentative borders had been signed into law, trade negotiations kept simple with the new kingdom. Simple, because no one had the guts to go out and sink their teeth into opportunity when they saw it.

No one, except him. Libra was a kingdom filled with wineries and skilled craftsmen– Schlatt knew it was valuable. He’d already been working on building his life as a merch before then; why not try his hand at something bigger? Something that would perhaps, cycle him back to power?

And money. Mostly money.

He’d bid all his savings on the idea, working night and day for ages, quietly signing trade agreements and getting down and dirty with the people of the land. He was cruel when he had

to be. He was efficient. A good merch is nothing but, and Schlatt is a *good* merch. His money had come in due time, and when King Thomas was nine and war was declared Schlatt knew that the cycle was just circling back around on itself. And he would watch from the sidelines—quiet for now, not supporting either side but keeping an eye on both, retreating back to the safety of his homeland and the protection that came with being Underground, watching as the cycle progressed. Politics shifted. Crowns fell. There were rumors the Emperor had beheaded the teenage king of the Isles on his gilded throne, but that was bullshit. Schlatt relied on two things: one, a good bottle of wine, and two, a slender friend who liked to talk. Quackity had let him know the king of the Isles was in Raven's Flight by the end of the month, and that was that. The Empire was now the commanding political force on the Continent.

Best butter them up a bit. Business follows politics, and people follow business.

So when Schlatt had gotten word that the Emperor and his family were on the move after a quiet winter, heading down south first to warmer waters, he'd tracked them. Then got the news— the fallen boy king wasn't with them. He was heading to Libra instead, accompanied by the fearsome General. Whispers flew in every direction regarding the boy's place in the palace. Schlatt knows better than to call it anything but a prison for the kid. He almost pities him.

Almost.

Because he's got bigger fish to fry. Pack up his bags, Waypoint his way out of the woods, haul his ass to Libra and rekindle some old connections. Quackity's gone AWOL on him— all he's got left are some eyes and ears here and there, he needs information and he needs it now; where better than the gossip capital of the world?

Librans loved to talk. It was all they fuckin' did— Schlatt's gotten his ears talked off his head more times than he can count. But if he talks back and provides the alcohol, they always end up like putty in his palm. It's worth it, because he's the king of his empire, the empire of *business*. Libra is a pit of gossip, so Schlatt pulls out the good shit from the basement that's worth more than a human life, and goes to see some of his old friends.

It's funny, he thinks, standing in the window of one of Libra's capitol buildings, watching the convoy descend down the streets. It's all garish shades of Empire blue and silver, clashing horrendously with the purple ambiance Libra generally holds. It stands out. It's easy to spot from above, and Schlatt swirls a glass of wine in his hand as he watches, tucked away in the corner of an empty meeting room by himself as he stares out the window and thinks. In one of those blue-topped carriages is a boy coming up on his fifteenth birthday, who's been caged like a bird for the past few months. And before that, shadowed his entire life.

Schlatt hums.

It's going to be interesting, that's for sure. He knows he's not the only shark that smells blood in the water— the Emperor is chumming it up on purpose. For as much as Philza pretends to play dumb, the man is incredibly calculating. Doubly so for his second in command, and *triple* so for his wife. Schlatt's never met the crown prince in person before, although he's heard rumors, so that'll be interesting on its own. The added bonus of the disgraced king of the Isles is like a cherry on top of a sundae. They make a strange royal family, and even

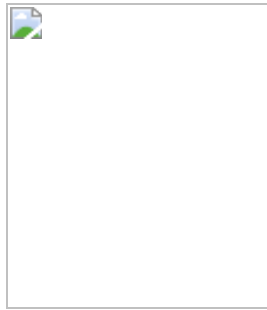
stranger is the fact that they haven't gotten rid of the kid yet. Is there something about him? Or is it just Philza's bleeding heart? Perhaps they know of his value, keeping him hidden away for so long to protect the capture of the Isles and legitimizing the claim. Schlatt bets it's the latter. By now, whatever claim they have on the Isles is fully secure, what with news of the surrender rippling through the Continent and causing no small amount of unrest in some parts of the Isles. The thought of it makes Schlatt want to get down there already and dig his fingers into the kid, shake him and ask him what about you is so special, huh? But he knows the answer, in truth:

He's a king. He's got power, even now. People will be clamoring after it like a mob.

*Prime*, Schlatt thinks, *I hope that kid knows what he's about to walk into.*

The carriages meander down the main road, pushing through crowds of people who watch in cacophonous awe, waving and shouting. Schlatt can't see specific people from so high up, but he can imagine the General sitting on one of the horses up front, face stoic and back as straight as the stick rammed up his ass. Fuckin' pricks, the lot of them. He grimaces, lifting the wine glass to his lips and downing it in one go. The alcohol burns the back of his throat and warms his cheeks, but he doesn't mind.

He's gonna need it.



“Will you stop leanin’ out the window?”

Tommy's found that when the General of the Antarctic Empire is in close quarters, he tends to drop the 'g' off the end of his words.

It's not a bad thing by any stretch— it doesn't affect how Tommy understands him, and his accent doesn't become any more difficult to decipher, but it makes him sound distinctly rural. It reminds Tommy that the man hadn't been born into nobility like the rest of them, and that in itself comes as a surprise whenever he's reminded of it. The man always seems to hold this strange, quiet grace in the air around him, even when he thinks no one is watching. His mouth curls downwards even when he's not actively scowling, eyes drooping just a tad, hair swooping low over his forehead where it's pulled back tightly against his skull in lines of intricate braids. His glasses are perched on the top of his nose, delicate silver things on a chain around his neck even now, and his eyes don't leave the pages of his book as he scolds Tommy lightly. His grace is noble, even if the man himself is not. “Someone's going to throw a rock or something if you keep it up.”

“No one would throw a rock at me,” Tommy says sharply, still keeping his head twisted out and peering towards the city around them. “And if they did, there’s guards around us. They couldn’t reach.”

This is a fair point. Their entourage surrounds them now as they enter Libra’s capital— a shining city called Vernal, if he’s remembering his geography right. Vernal. *In of, or appropriate to spring.*

The air here is warm.

*Spring*, finally.

Tommy breathes in their warm valley air and feels some curl of satisfaction deep in his gut. The city is old and new all at once; it feels like a temple and a church, a prayer to a higher being. Most of the buildings are stone, shaped and warped by magic hands over centuries of occupation, and Tommy can spot tiny wellsprings and fountain pipes in nooks and crannies as they pass. The stone is brilliantly white in some places, dark in others, and this city is a cacophony of color above all else. He thought he was tired of only seeing the same dark colors of the north. He hadn’t realized how truly exhausted he was of the monotony until they’d seen a caravan on their way south, the tops of the wagons a rainbow of brightly-colored cloth. He’d almost cried just from how *pretty* it was. Vernal is just as colorful, if not more— purple is the main background to everything else, but there are splashes of gold and plum and jade, dots of lavender and carmine, ocher and amber, and every single color name he can think of. The Empire hadn’t been entirely bland, but he’d been locked up in that stone castle for ninety-nine percent of his time there, and to finally see a city, alive, properly alive, is a relief.

It helps that he can’t remember ever having visited Vernal before. He must have, when he was a baby or a very small child, but whatever memories he has of it are lost. This is new for him. Tommy is astute enough to make the connection between spring and new beginnings, and his own personal goal of this trip.

Make friends. Find allies.

He glances up towards the spiralling towers of Vernal’s council buildings and government centers, and gnaws on his bottom lip. He thanks Prime he knows he already has a friend inside.

His and Ranboo’s letters had been less frequent than his and Tubbo’s, but they’d kept up the correspondence too. Ranboo was insufferable— constantly making puns, joking around, his handwriting perfect and sentence structure obtuse. Tommy absolutely hated the man, which is to say, he’d become closer to him than anyone else in the entire Continent except Tubbo, and perhaps Dream. Ranboo was perfect, yes, but he was perfectly flawed and Tommy couldn’t tease him enough about it.

He was genuinely excited to see the other boy, if he was honest. Would he admit it? No. But he is. The elation grows as they travel the long spiral road up to the city center, skipping over the shorter routes in order to really... do something. Tommy thinks they’re just showing off. It certainly feels like they’re showing off, with the crowds of people that clamor and crowd



the sides of the street to watch as they pass. Around and around, until finally, the claustrophobic streets open up into an open, circular, cobbed space. Huge towers arise on either side of them, pure, gleaming white with intricate carvings up the sides. Five of them in total, and Tommy openly gapes out the window as they arrive.

“Enjoying the view?” Technoblade asks. Tommy nods, tipping his head up and staring at the dark tiled roofs of the towers. Each one has a different purpose, he thinks, dragging on what knowledge he has of Libra. One’s a government building, one’s the main council chambers, one is— something. Tommy presses his lips together and inhales the warm air, stubbornly keeping his head poked out of the window until the carriage jolts to a halt. He pulls his head back inside, stretching his legs out and pressing his boots against the fabric of the seat across from him. Technoblade shuts his book, gently taking the glasses off his nose and letting them fall against his chest. Tommy throws his arms up, giving his whole body one big stretch.

“I am so ready to get out of this fucking carriage,” he complains absently, tipping his head to peer out the window to the blue sky again. Around them, people are bustling and chatting, and after a second the door swings open. Purpled stands out in the sun, hair glistening and face distinctly expressionless.

“The council is here to greet you,” he says, and Tommy feels another twinge of excitement in his stomach.

“Don’t say anything,” Technoblade says, setting his book to the side and cracking his neck. Purpled— Alexei, Tommy has to remind himself— steps aside to let them out of the carriage. He leaves behind his cloak and gloves in favor of feeling the sun on his skin, stepping out onto the stones. The carriage creaks as Techno gets out behind him, but Tommy just steps forward and squints. There are a lot of people moving around, of course, but across the way at the base of the closest tower is a group of people. Tommy can make out some familiar faces— Hannah, her hair done intricately on her head, sleeves long and fluttering like two gossamer wings. Connor, brown hair and plain face, cream outfit, forgettable in every way. And then, there in the back, two-toned hair split almost exactly down the middle. Tommy feels himself smiling before he realizes he is.

“Let me do the talking,” Technoblade reminds him, a hand heavy on his shoulder. Tommy glances up, and Techno blinks down at him, surprise flickering across his face for a moment. “You look... happy.”

“I’ve never been here before,” Tommy admits. “It’s exciting. I’m just glad to be somewhere new, I guess.”

“That’s good to hear.” Techno squeezes his shoulder briefly before letting go, tipping his head up to study the council as they start to make their way over. “The others should be here today or tomorrow. It’s a longer trip from the Isles.”

“Right.” And almost immediately, Tommy’s mood is somewhat soured. In his excitement of a new place and seeing his friend, he’d almost forgotten that the rest of the entire royal family had just been in Caterwaul.

Almost.

The ache of homesickness is normal now, a constant background noise to the soundtrack of his life. Tommy ignores the urge to curl his arms around his stomach and go back to the carriage, because it's far too late for that. Instead, he tips his head a little higher, and shrugs.

"Sounds good," he says dryly. In the distance, Ranboo raises a hand hesitantly, and then gives an awkward half-wave. Tommy bites back another smile.

"General," someone says as they approach, and Hannah steps forward with a wide smile across painted lips. She holds her hand out and Technoblade steps forward, grasping hers gently and nodding.

"Council," he says, addressing all of them as he does. "Head councilwoman. It is an honor to be welcomed."

"It is an honor to host you." Hannah's fingers are slender and pale, painted on the ends. Tommy's never seen nails painted before. He stays quiet, even as her gaze flicks to him. "Both of you."

Tommy disregards Techno's pointed look, smiles, and nods his head. "Thank you. Vernal is a gorgeous city. I'm looking forward to spending as much time here as I can."

"You're always welcome. May this be a new time of peace and prosperity for all of us. There will be celebrations to welcome you, of course, and while Saint's Day has passed, there are still plenty of happenings in the city for you to partake in. Many have been vying to get their eye on you." Hannah's fingers flick towards Tommy, elegant and mischievous. In a flash, her smile tips a little bit, cheekier now. "In fact, I'd hate to take up your time with boring formalities. I'm sure the General can stand in for you. Our youngest, Ranboo, has enthusiastically volunteered to show you to your room—" In the back, Ranboo's face goes bright red. "— so I'll let him take it from here." She steps aside, and Tommy goes to take a step forward, but pauses. Glances back. Technoblade is watching him, eyes narrowed but not out of any suspicion, he thinks. It's just sunny out.

He nods.

Tommy lets a smile curl over his face ( *make friends, make allies, let them **pity** you* ) and throws himself forward, stumbling up one or two steps before slamming into Ranboo's chest. The other boy is laughing in surprise, but happily tosses his arms over Tommy's shoulders and hugs him back. It's warm, his nose pressed to the top of Tommy's head and chest rising and falling with his laughter as people murmur around them. Tommy, genuinely, doesn't care. Despite the voice whispering in the back of his head, he is happy to see Ranboo. It's a friendly face, and an even friendlier voice.

"It's good to see you too," Ranboo says quietly, and Tommy pulls out of the hug, coughing slightly. He smooths down his jacket with a look, huffing a bit.

"That doesn't mean I missed you," he adds, just for deniability.

"Right," Ranboo says.

“I didn’t,” Tommy says, poking a finger into his chest. “Not one bit. You owe me a rematch of tic tac toe.”

“That *was* surprisingly effective long distance,” Ranboo says. “You’re just a sore loser.”

“I am not!” Tommy is grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. People are still talking behind them, but it’s moved on to something louder and less important, so he doesn’t hesitate this time to duck in for one more quick hug with the taller boy. He hides his face for just a second—Ranboo smells like cedar and cinnamon, strangely— and lets his eyes get hot, expression scrunched. “Bitch.”

“Aw, come on,” Ranboo says gently when he pulls away, a smile still beaming across his face brighter than the sunlight above them. “You just got here and you’re already being mean.”

“Ranboo.” A voice cuts through their banter, and with a start Tommy realizes they have yet to walk off the stairs and actually get going. Hannah is watching them both with an amused expression, and around them the rest of the council members are smiling or laughing softly to themselves. “Why don’t you two head off?”

“Right,” Ranboo says hurriedly. “Right. Come on, your— uh, esteemed guest?”

Tommy hooks his arm with Ranboo’s and grins as they walk down the marble steps, the swish of fabric trailing them. Alexei follows, and Technoblade raises a hand dismissively as a few soldiers break off the main caravan and follow them both. Ranboo glances over his shoulder with a strange expression, and Tommy sighs. “You’ll get used to it,” he tells him. “Since I’m your esteemed guest, after all. They’ll be everywhere, crawling around the woodwork like termites.”

“Oh,” Ranboo says, glancing back again. “That’s... nice.”

“Don’t worry,” Tommy reassures him once more. “They’ll only mess with us if I try to run away or something like that, but if I’m honest, my arse is sore from riding in the fucking cart all day. And I’ve never been here, so I want to see everything.”

“But maybe not now?” Ranboo asks. “Because of your ass?”

“How dare you talk about my ass,” Tommy shoots back. His cheeks still hurt from smiling. “But maybe not now. I want to lie down.”

“Well I can’t promise that we’ll lie down for too long,” Ranboo says, glancing up. Tommy follows his gaze— inlaid in one of the shining towers gleaming against the sky around them is a huge clock, and the hands point upwards. “But we should have time to relax. And... I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Tommy hums. “Is it a good one?”

“It’s...” Ranboo hisses through his teeth. “... It’s surprise-shaped, that’s for sure.”

“Give me a hint,” Tommy demands. “Something good, not a shitty hint, something that can actually let me guess.”

“It’s loud,” Ranboo says after a second of thoughtful silence, their feet clicking across the marble. They’re approaching another tower, the entrance gold-trimmed and doors wide open to let in the warm air. Tommy blinks as they enter, the light changing slightly and his eyes taking a moment to adjust. “And smart.”

“Huh?” Tommy squints at him. “Sentient, then, innit?”

“Well...” Ranboo is gnawing on his lip, then glances over his shoulder. “He— it, sorry, it’s definitely annoying at times.”

“OI!”

Tommy laughs, bright and loud, and behind them footsteps patter up the stairs.

“I’m so fucking *pissed* they wouldn’t let me stand with you all,” Tubbo says, and Tommy lets go of Ranboo’s arm in order to turn and grin as Tubbo makes his way into the foyer. “Hello, dick face.”

“Someone’s a sore loser,” Tommy sings, and then Tubbo is throwing himself at him and they’re hugging too. Not for long— Tubbo pulls away, smiling as wide as he can, showing teeth as stares up at him. “Hi.”

“Surprise!” Tubbo chirps. “I’m your surprise. Hello.”

“Mosquito,” Ranboo says. “Constantly buzzing.”

“I’ll smash your head in while you sleep,” Tubbo says fondly.

“I can’t believe you two are getting married,” Tommy complains loudly, making sure his tone is filled with disgust. “Like old people. To each other!”

“And to think,” Ranboo says pleasantly, turning his eyes to Tubbo. “I was gonna ask him to be part of the wedding party.”

Tommy blinks. Warmth curls in his chest, and for a moment, surprise. He’s quick to cover it up, slathering bravado over the swelling happiness like butter on warm bread. “And have to wear fancy clothes and play along with polite society?” Tommy scoffs. “As if.”

“Told you,” Tubbo mutters, and Ranboo elbows him back. Tommy smiles at the both of them.

“Besides,” he continues. “If I’m a part of Ranboo’s wedding party, how could I be on Tubbo’s?”

“He makes a fair point,” Tubbo says. “A very fair point! You’re being quite selfish, Ran-boo. Tommy is my friend too. Actually, I think I asked him to be my friend first. So, hah! I win!”

“This is not a competition,” Ranboo snaps back. Tommy laughs. “It’s not! Friendship is not— no, that’s not how it works!”

“And who made you the expert on friendship?” Tommy asks. “Hmm?”

As they bicker, they make their way deeper and deeper into the tower. This isn't one of the government buildings, as far as Tommy can tell— it's more entertainment, with a theatre room and large, open spaces for gatherings and parties. Tommy has heard stories of Libra's parties. They're occasionally legendary. More commonly, they're raucous and gaudy, extravagant displays of wealth and prosperity. Tommy has always wanted to attend one, and this trip seems like his chance. They ascend a few staircases, Ranboo and Tubbo chit chatting all the way, mostly about wedding things or the occasional newest invention, updates from a world Tommy is locked away from.

At one point, he gets brave.

"Have you heard anything about the Isles?" he asks, and Tubbo glances over.

"Some," he says. "Like what, specifically?"

"The people?" Tommy asks. "The— the rules? I know a lord is running things in the Empire's stead, but I'm not told jack otherwise."

"From what I know, the people are fine," Ranboo says. "As fine as they can be with ration orders and curfews. I think they've been exporting mostly to the Empire, but Libra has some things coming in still as well."

Tommy stares down at the smooth stone floors and twists his fingers in one hand, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

"That's good," he rationalizes. "Not bad."

"I've heard Sneeg is a fair lord," Tubbo says. "I met him once."

"Yeah," Tommy says, thinking back to war tents and strangulation attempts. "So did I."

"Oh- *kay*," Ranboo says, a fake sort of cheerfulness permeating his tone. "On that note, we have arrived. This is one of the guest floors— Tommy, you'll be sleeping here. There's a lot to do, though, so, probably won't be spending too much time in your room."

"Yeah?" Tommy asks. "I'm only here for a few days— there can't be *that* much planned."

Tubbo laughs. Ranboo grimaces.

"There's a dinner tonight," he says, and then bites his lip. "And, uh. One second." He fumbles in the breast of his overcoat, fingers retrieving a small book from one of the pockets there. He thumbs it open to a specific page, marked with a small feather pen. The spine is creased, and the pages are ragged in places. Ranboo nods. "Okay. So. Dinner tonight, tomorrow morning there's brunch in the Little Spire—"

"And you have council before that," Tubbo reminds him quietly.

"Andddd I have council before that," Ranboo mutters, picking up his pen and scribbling that down. "Then after there's some meetings. Free time until afternoon, then a walk through the

city, then an opera that night we all have to attend.” He scans the rest of the page, grimacing. “Next few days are pretty much just events and meetings.”

“Gross,” Tubbo says cheerfully. “I’m so glad I get to sleep in.”

“I will punt you,” Ranboo says, snapping the book shut and tucking it into his pocket. Tommy sighs.

“The grind never stops,” he bemoans, bringing a hand up to press against his forehead. “Everyone just loves seeing me around and working.”

“Oh, there’s tons of people coming into the city,” Tubbo chirps. “Mostly to see you, if I had to guess.”

Tommy scowls, and Ranboo ushers them into a fairly standard guest bedroom— the ceilings are high and arched, stone walls smooth but not too chilly. There’s a large window across the way, an unlit fireplace, and a bed made with light purple blankets and pillows. Tommy, suddenly, finds himself missing the yellow colors of his room in the Empire.

At some point, it had become his. Not the Yellow Room anymore, but Tommy’s. He gnaws on his lip, runs his hand over the back of the chair sitting in the corner as Tubbo beelines for the bed and bounces off the sheets with a little laugh.

“We have time to relax before dinner,” Ranboo says, still standing by the door. Tommy glances over— they lock eyes, just for a moment, and the room goes quiet.

Tommy doesn’t know what to do.

He wants to plead, *help me* . He wants to ask his friends for help, but he can’t yet. If he tells them what’s going on in his head (the coup, Dream, Purpled, *everything* —) they will surely tell. He couldn’t handle that. They’re his friends, and a betrayal like that seems inconceivable.

They’re his friends.

Friends, real true friends that are the first he’s ever really had. Sure, he’d had the occasional playmate when he was smaller back in the Isles, but never an actual friend who he’d sent letters to and chatted shit with and playfully bantered. He’d never had someone to confide in before except for Dream, and the feeling is new and... exciting.

He likes having friends. He likes watching Ranboo’s face twist in confusion and then hesitantly smile, as though he’s awkwardly trying on a new coat that doesn’t quite fit just yet. Ranboo is like that— awkward, unsure, but utterly at home despite himself. Tubbo is the same. He’s a guest in Libra, but he’s Ranboo’s fiance and clearly knows his place here. Tommy is the least stable corner of their small triangle. He has no idea what he’s doing, not yet, and he’s going to need their help whether or not they like (or realize) it.

“We have time before dinner,” Ranboo says, and Tommy smiles back at him. “If you wanted to sleep.”

Tommy pretends to consider it— his mind is already made up. “Yeah,” he says after a second, and Tubbo yawns, loud and obnoxious. “Shut up, dickhead.”

“I didn’t say anything!” Tubbo cries, and Tommy stubbornly ignores him as he turns and marches over, collapsing face-first onto the bed. “Hey!”

“Shh,” Ranboo says. “I think he needs a nap.”

“I’ll kill you,” Tommy says into the fabric of the bedsheets, muffled. “I’ll clart you.”

“You can try.” Floorboards creak and a hand rests on his head for a brief moment— Tommy lifts it, blearily staring up as Ranboo stands above him. “Uh. Hi?”

Tommy is relieved that friends are forgiving. It’s one of the things he likes most about Tubbo and Ranboo— so forgiving. Especially after he launches himself up and Ranboo shrieks, Tubbo cackling with laughter as they roll on the floor and grapple.

The rest of the night flies by. Ranboo and Tubbo do a good job of keeping Tommy sequestered away from prying eyes that night, and they’re subtle about it. Tommy is eternally grateful, although he does get stopped at one point by Technoblade.

“Are you alright?” he asks, grasping Tommy’s arm in the hallway after they’d finished the meal with the council and had been dismissed.

“I’m fine,” Tommy tells him, squinting up at the general with a questioning look. The man looks constipated. “Are you?”

“Fine,” Techno says. “Just— fine. Those two, they’re good for you?”

“Very,” Tommy informs him, wriggling his arm out of the older man’s grasp. “They’re very good for me. My best friends. Now, if you don’t mind—”

“Hold on,” Techno says, sounding mildly amused. “I’m letting you have free reign for tonight, but when Phil and the others get here tomorrow, don’t expect the same laxness.”

“Sure, tighten your already suffocating leash,” Tommy says with a roll of his eyes. “I’ll be fine. I’m not going to run off. You guys have made it painfully clear I wouldn’t get far. I’m having *fun* with Tubbo and Ranboo. I don’t want to run off.”

“Just making sure you know,” Techno says. “And— that you know that you’re under our surveillance, yes, but our protection too. If anyone does anything or says anything that sounds... wrong, let me know. Okay?”

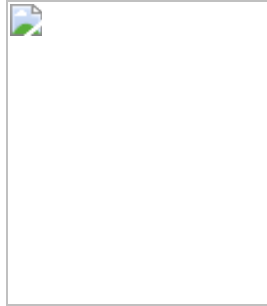
Tommy stares at him, the lines on his face and the quiet exhaustion present under the general’s eyes.

“Okay,” he says. And then: “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Techno says. He opens his mouth again and Tommy waits, raises his brow, but all the general says is: “I’ll hold them off tomorrow. Phil, that is. Let you have your fun.”

Tommy stares at him, anxiety and guilt twisting in his gut for only a second, but he shoves it back. This man was complacent in the destruction of his rule, is half the reason there was a war at all. He blinks, then nods.

“Thanks,” he says, then turns on his heel and makes his escape before he says anything he regrets.



“I simply think orange sequins are *classy*,” Tubbo says across the room, holding up an atrocity of a vest. “And good for reflecting any pointed magical attempts on my life.” He stares pointedly across the room, unblinking.

“I think you’re overestimating how important people think you are,” Ranboo claps back, kicking his feet up on the chair and absently flipping the pages of the book he’d been trying to read. Tommy and Tubbo had not been letting him do it peacefully. The day had genuinely been fun– Tommy had woken up late, dread in his stomach at the thought of the Empire’s royal family arriving today, but other than hearing the sound of bells and chimes, he hadn’t heard a single thing about it. Ranboo and Tubbo had come and gotten him a little after breakfast, and they’d walked through the plaza together as Ranboo explained some stuff about Libra and Tubbo had joined in with various historical facts.

“The dragons represent the Ender Mother,” Ranboo had told him, pointing up at the beasts encircling one of the towers, engraved and immortalized in stone. “Every Libran believes in her. She’s the source of all magic in the world, for us, at least.”

“Prime would disagree,” Tommy says, but as pious as he is he’s not about to start a theological debate.

“I’m of the personal opinion the Ender Mother is based off of those beasts that patrol the water around here,” Tubbo says excitedly. “They’ve caused so many shipwrecks. They’re half the reason Libra was never discovered! And there’s this theory going around now that they’re not even organic sea monsters. Some people think they’re metal. Isn’t that insane??”

“Very insane,” Ranboo says, patting Tubbo on the head.

“You’re insane,” Tommy says lightly, dodging a slap to his arm. “Oi!”

“It’s interesting,” Tubbo complains.



The rest of the day had been... relaxed. Tommy had been free to roam, and Ranboo and Tubbo had spent most of their time with him (although Ranboo less so— who knew being on the council meant having to do work? Hah! Tommy pities him!) and they'd filled the afternoon with fun things like taking Tommy to a street cart in the main plaza and laughing as he spat out a *ridiculously* spicy ball of dough. He'd *cried* , it had been that bad, those pricks. Then they'd come back to Ranboo's room, and Tommy had snooped through his stuff before collapsing on his bed and staring at the stars painted onto the ceiling.

He's having fun, all things considered.

(He's got a lot on his mind. Sue him, if he wants a day or two to lounge about and explore with his friends.)

"Sequins are tacky," Tommy says now, as they lounge about before they're required to go to the show tonight. Ranboo says it's important, which is dumb, because Ranboo is dumb. Tommy is going to hate sitting through the three-hour-long thing, but he'll do it, if only because Tubbo had promised to let him sit in their box with them. He stands up off the bed, meandering towards Tubbo via a way of clinging to the wall and walking slowly. "You should wear them. Next to you, I'll look amazing."

"What are *you* going to wear?" Ranboo asks, and Tommy freezes where he's poking at the spine of a book on a shelf. He half-turns, and finds both boys staring at him expectantly.

"Um," he says, and then looks down at his outfit. "... This?"

Tubbo's face twists, and Ranboo blinks. He snaps his book shut with a *click* . Tommy has the innate sense he's done something wrong.

"You can't wear *that* ," Tubbo insists. "For one, it's traveling clothes. No way."

"Well, this, but like, fancier," Tommy amends, smoothing his hands down the front of his jacket. It's warmer in Libra than it is in the Empire, but the spring air still clings on to some remnants of the winter, cold and sharp. "From in my trunk?"

"Absolutely not," Tubbo says, and he drops the ridiculous vest in order to stalk over to Tommy and circle him like a shark around prey. Tommy stands very, very still, and pretends like he isn't a little scared.

"Well, fuck off then," he bites back, because words are more powerful than actions anyway. "I don't exactly have anything else." At that, Tubbo gets on his tiptoes, placing a hand just over Tommy's head. He squints one eye shut, glances between Tommy and Ranboo (who is looking just as confused as Tommy feels)— and nods.

"You can borrow something from Ranboo's closet," he says firmly. "He's taller than you, but it'll just drape longer than normal. You can't wear this shit to the opera. You have to look nice."

"Says the guy who plans on wearing a shiny vest," Ranboo points out, and Tubbo sticks a finger out in his direction, accusing.

“Shut it,” he says playfully. “You be quiet.”

“Damn,” Tommy mumbles. “Gonna let him boss you around like that?”

“I don’t really have a choice,” Ranboo says despondently, but there’s the hint of a smile as he gets up from his chair and makes his way over to the huge armoire in the corner of the room and flings it open with one silver handle. If Tommy didn’t know any better, he’d think Ranboo agreed with Tubbo’s stupid idea.

“Boob?” Tommy asks, laughing nervously. “What’re you doing?”

“Finding you something to wear,” Ranboo says, much to his dismay. “Tubbo’s right.”

“Nooo,” Tommy drawls out. “No, no no no no, not you too. I swear, it’s fine.”

“Look,” Tubbo says, and it’s in a tone of voice that sounds pragmatic and firm. “You haven’t been here before, or recently. Libra is big on presentation. You’ve seen Hannah’s hair.”

“She wakes up before the sun rises to do it,” Ranboo says cheerfully, head stuck in his closet and voice muffled. Tommy thinks of the councilwoman’s intricate braids and grimaces.

“Exactly,” Tubbo says. “So everyone’s going to be looking at you. And judging you.”

“Way to soothe my nerves,” Tommy mumbles, eyes flicking about the room.

“You’ll be more confident if you look like a king,” Tubbo continues, ignoring him. “Or a prince. Or whatever. Not– not this. You look sad, right now.”

*I am sad*, Tommy doesn’t say.

“Fuck you.” He tips his chin up. “What the fuck?”

“There it is!” Tubbo chirps, and then reaches up with one hand to swat his head. “Ranboo, found something yet?”

“I think so,” the older boy says with a hum, pulling his head from the closet, arms following. They’re full of cloth– long and flowing, Tommy can already picture the style. He crosses his arms as Ranboo gently lets the clothing hang, a mix of white and green and gold. It’s some sort of silky fabric, loose and flowing, embroidery hidden along the edges of the outer jacket-gown. It ripples in the light when Ranboo turns it over in his hands. “I outgrew this one last week.”

“You’re like a weed,” Tubbo tells him, going over to smooth one scarred hand down the front of it. “Good enough.”

“Hold on,” Tommy says. “I’m not– hold on! I’m not from Libra. I don’t– I shouldn’t be wearing your fuckin’ clothes, Ranboo. Isn’t that weird?”

“On the contrary, boss man,” Tubbo says. Ranboo ducks his head in a nod.

“Everyone will like it,” he agrees. “You’re taking the time to appreciate our culture.”

“I have no idea what culture you mean,” Tommy tells him stoically as the two approach, and he eyes the outfit. “If someone asks me, I’ll have no idea.”

“They won’t ask,” Ranboo says, and he sounds sure of himself. “But they’ll notice.”

“Great,” Tommy says, and he gives into the birdbrain and reaches out to run his fingers over the shiny smooth surface of the outfit. It’s soft under his fingertips, silken and creamy. He could count every individual thread if he wanted to, and it’s clear that whoever made this put untold amounts of love behind it. “So I’ve got to worry about people judging me, real great.”

“You’ll be fine,” Ranboo says with a smile, lopsided and toothy. “We’ll be with you the whole night. Promise.”

“Won’t leave our sight,” Tubbo promises. Tommy looks between them and the outfit, then quietly takes a breath. His stomach churns—his brain is on fire right now with conflicting emotion, and somewhere in the middle of it all is that scheming anger from the nights before with Dream. He takes the gown in his hands and Ranboo gladly hands it over, Tommy still staring down at the glistening threads as they ripple under his fingers like waves on the ocean. It reminds him of the whitecaps back home. It reminds him of home in general, the green and white and gold. It’s everything the Empire doesn’t want him to be.

“Okay,” Tommy says. “Give me a minute.”

“Let me know if you need help,” Ranboo says kindly (god, he’s so— Tommy sighs, pretending like he isn’t slightly irritated by his neverending charity) and Tommy brushes past to the corner of the room. He dips behind the changing screens and listens as Tubbo and Ranboo bicker quietly back and forth, the rustle of fabric in his hands background noise as he sheds his Empire colors and dons Ranboo’s clothes instead. A soft white layer of pants and shirt are first, embroidered with gold and green, and a sash is tied neatly around his waist. On top of that is an overcoat that’s long enough to be a gown— Tommy is sure that on Ranboo it would be shorter but for him it nearly reaches his ankles. It swoops and glides with him as he moves, buttoning up the front of it and making sure the high collar sits right on his throat. The fabric isn’t tight enough to make him feel like he’s choking, and in fact, the whole thing is quite comfortable. He holds a hand out and shakes it, the sleeves long and dragging a bit as he finishes buttoning everything up.

“You okay back there?” Ranboo asks, cutting through his internal monologue, and Tommy startles.

“Fine,” he grunts. “It’s all flowy ‘n shit.”

“Have you seen me?” Ranboo asks. “That’s pretty standard.”

“Still,” Tommy says, ducking back out from behind the screen and messing absently with his bangs. The sleeves add an extra weight to his arms that he fights against to do so, shaking his hands out when he lowers them to his sides. Across the room, Tubbo has gone still. Ranboo

is a bit closer, and his eyes widen slightly when Tommy comes into view. “What?” he asks. “Don’t just– stand there.”

“No!” Ranboo says quickly, shaking his head. “No, no, this is a good shock! Just– hold on a second.” He turns and disappears into the side room, and Tommy is left bereft. He looks towards Tubbo, who just raises his hands in surrender.

“I hate him,” Tommy tells Tubbo. The other boy just shrugs.

“Can’t relate.”

“Stop talking about me, I can hear you,” Ranboo says cheerfully, and then he reappears with a grin. Tommy raises a brow– Ranboo matches the gesture, holding his hands out carefully. They’re cupped, and in the center is a mass of gold and gemstones.

“The fuck is this?” Tommy asks, staring at it. Ranboo shrugs, clothes rustling.

“It’s a circlet,” he tells Tommy, voice lowering just slightly. “I– well, I know it’s not a crown, and by any legal rights you aren’t a king, but you’re still– you know. You.”

Tommy stares at him. Ranboo stares back.

“Um,” he says a second later. “I mean, you don’t... have to take it. It’s just an accessory, I guess. No pressure? No– I mean, seriously, uh, no pressure–”

“Give it.” Tommy swipes out with one hand, snagging the golden links with his fingers and dragging the gems out along the lines of finery. It *is* a circlet. Tommy’s worn them before, complicated and delicate, but this one is fairly simple with some more rigid lines of gold to frame his forehead. He raises it up, and Ranboo offers a helping hand in taming his hair slightly as they arrange it neatly on his head. When they’re done he steps back, smiling a little as Tommy fusses with a curl and settles it back into place. “Well?” he asks, sweeping his arms wide and turning in a circle. “How do I look?”

Ranboo is quiet. Tubbo is too, and when Tommy turns enough to see them both again, Ranboo is beaming. Tubbo is smiling as well, lips pulled thin and happy.

“You look nice,” Tubbo says finally. “I guess. The public eye will be happy.”

“Prime help me,” Tommy prays, tipping his head to the sky. Laughter trails after him, and he can’t help but smile.

They don’t have much time left after Tommy gets dressed to mess around, Tubbo reading aloud from a book to the both of them as Ranboo continues getting ready himself and Tommy lounges on the bed, occasionally tossing out jokes or crass remarks about the phrasing in Tubbo’s book to make them both laugh. Before long he finds himself between them both, arm-in-arm as they head down the stairs of the tower and across the stones of the plaza to reach the other side, and the Opera House. The sky is alight with a thousand different colors, the sunset a brilliant thing. As they walk, fireworks go off in the distance, and a raucous

cheer comes from one of the streets that Tommy can just barely see down. But they don't stop or make time to explore— Ranboo explains that they can't miss this, no they cannot, he will be in *so* much trouble if he misses this event, he's missed *six* in the past two months because of Tubbo and his dumb penchant for *getting them off track*— *ow! Don't hit me!*—

Regardless, they're back inside sooner than later, huge velvety drapes decorating the entrance of the House. People mingle and voices raise above their heads as Ranboo pulls them to the side, checks them in, whatever. Tommy isn't paying attention.

There are so many people here, and all of them are ridiculously gaudy. It's an opera, yes, but the gala room is full and people are chatting in the hours before the show. Women with necks full of pearls and gemstones, men in military uniform and evening dress. Tommy recognizes some people, others are entirely foreign. He knows some cultural dress (most are kitted in Libran wear, but he sees a few Empire colors amongst the crowd and he realizes that likely, Philza and his family will be here tonight. He'll see them again. He's not sure if he's ready for that or not.)

"Smooth your front," Ranboo hisses to him as the man beside the door *loudly* announces all of their names. Tommy hurriedly smoothes down his overcoat, and he's glad he did because when the echoes of his name reverb around the room, the voices dim, just slightly. People turn and stare.

Tubbo squeezes his arm, and they start to walk down the stairs, past huge open windows that show the quickly-darkening sky. Nervous, Tommy glances to the side and there, in the mirrored glass of one of those large windows, is a boy.

He's blond, hair curly and puffy, a mess except for the dents where a delicate golden circlet lies, glimmering gems decorating his forehead. His shoulders are held back regally, chin tipped upwards. The boy gives the glass a smile and he looks happy; the bags under his eyes are less prominent and his skin pale but reminiscent of summer. His eyes— bright blue, wide with childish innocence— stare back at him, piercing and just as cold as the northern winter he's just experienced. He looks older than his age. He's grown taller. The Libran fashion on his shoulders cuts an almost intimidating form, and as Tommy watches the boy settle his shoulders just a bit more, leaning into the touch of his friends beside him, he smiles.

He looks like a king again. It's a reflection he recognizes, if not a bit changed. The clothing is foreign and he looks more hardened, more war-torn than the boy that left the Isles months ago. But it's still him. Tommy can recognize himself, and that very thought nearly brings him to tears.

"You alright?" somebody mumbles in his ear, and he snaps his gaze away from his reflection to Tubbo at his side.

"Fine," he says, and then a second later. "Peachy, actually."

"Good," Tubbo says. "Now pay attention, I was talking."

"You're so fucking bossy," Tommy tells him, and Tubbo just links their elbows and grins over his head. On the other side, Ranboo links up as well, and then they're a chain of three.

“Get used to it. Across the room— that’s Iskall Quake. I haven’t seen him since before the war. Wow, he’s changed.” Iskall Quake is a bearded older man, grizzled, a gilded eye patch claiming most of Tommy’s attention until they move on.

Ranboo pipes up, nodding subtly. “Over there, that’s a countess— Niki Nihachu.” Tommy glances over just for a moment and catches her eye. She is short, smiling widely as she chats with a young man in military dress, blonde hair pulled back into an elegant low bun, and she dips her head to him in acknowledgement.

“Jack Manifold!” Tubbo chirps in his ear, and Tommy hides his startle with a glance in Tubbo’s direction. He’s grinning ear-to-ear, a delighted look on his face. “Oh, I haven’t seen him in *ages* . If I’m gonna be honest, you two would get along splendidly. Here they come.”

“Ranboo,” the countess says with that same big smile, pearly teeth and dark lipstick. She leans in on her tiptoes, and Ranboo bends to meet her as she presses her cheek to his. “And your fiance, dear Underscore. Your Grace,” she offers to Tommy and Tubbo, and Tommy nods evenly in her direction.

“Everyone’s talkin’ about you two,” the man says— the one in military dress, who Tubbo had affectionately named as Jack Manifold. “Engagement and all. Congrats?”

“You have to come to the summer house,” Niki says affectionately, clasping her hand with Tubbo’s and then turning her gaze to Tommy. He lifts his chin just the slightest bit higher. She matches his look, grin spreading wider. “And of course you are invited as well, my lord.”

“Countess,” Tommy says, trying his best to be *charming* and *kind* and *polite* . Hundreds of hours of lessons had been spent trying to teach him manners— only some of them had stuck. “A summer house sounds lovely.”

“After so much winter, I can only imagine you’d be relieved?” She asks, a lilt in her voice as Jack Manifold takes her gloved arm in hand, and oh, isn’t that a question? Tommy knows then that Tubbo and Ranboo’s engagement is, in fact, second on the list of gossip tonight.

“I try to see the sun as often as I can,” he says after a second, still smiling, face tighter than it had been a moment ago.

“Then I shall support your endeavors and insist you come sometime,” she says. Tommy reaches out with one arm to clasp her hand gently, the silk of her gloves matching his own sleeves in color. It slips under his grasp, and her own fingers tighten around his wrist. “No one should be kept from the sun.”

“Thank... you.” Tommy looks at her for just a second longer, that wide smile, and then she releases his hand and Ranboo is quick to occupy his arm again.

“I’ve never been up north myself, see,” Jack Manifold pipes up. “The snow ‘n all. Is it true it can go for weeks at a time?”

“The longest storm this winter was eight days long, I think,” Tommy says, dragging his eyes away from the countess and joining the conversation again. He feels... strange. Safe, because

he is cocooned between Tubbo and Ranboo, and he trusts them both implicitly at this point. He knows they will have his back— but he’s exposed too, as people chatter around them, and Niki Nihachu watches him with a look of quiet amusement.

“You said it was nine, in your letters,” Tubbo corrects him. Tommy shrugs.

“Nine then,” he says. “The days all blend together.”

And so does conversation. Tommy finds he does enjoy Jack Manifold’s company— the man is blunt, almost to a point of rudeness, but he’s funny as hell. Niki is polite and kind and wishes them all well when it’s time to move on, the flow of faces bending around them as Tubbo and Ranboo point out different names and people and things they’ve done. It’s a constant stream of information, and Tommy absorbs it all as they work their way around the room. Neither Tubbo nor Ranboo leave his side for very long at all; one of them is constantly attached to his arm or standing beside him, the other never gone for long periods of time or far away. He’d be annoyed with their clinginess if it wasn’t so *reassuring*. He has someone to fall back on at every moment, a conversation helper, someone who can whisper in his ear and tell him if he’s made a blunder after the fact. Ranboo seems to think towards quite the contrary— his cheeks are flushed, eyes sparkling as he cheerfully tells Tommy that he is making a great impression on everyone they’ve spoken to just yet. Everything is going wonderful, in Tommy’s opinion.

And then it’s not.

“Thomas,” someone says from behind him, a voice filled with shaking anger, and Tommy’s stomach plops out of his body and onto the floor. He turns.

“Wilbur,” he says, smiling thinly. Behind him stands Wilbur, hands clasped neatly behind his back and a forced smile on his face. Tommy hasn’t seen him since yesterday, and not properly in weeks. The other prince is staring at him with an intense look, although Tommy is relieved to see Philza or Kristin are nowhere in sight. Tubbo and Ranboo turn their heads and are quick to nod, formal.

“Your Highness,” Tubbo says. Ranboo murmurs something similar.

“Underscore.” Wilbur’s gaze is harsh, and then it flicks to Ranboo. “Councilmember. I assume you two are the reason for the getup, then?”

“Mine?” Tommy asks, glancing down. Wilbur nods.

“It’s a gift,” Ranboo says, and there’s... something, in his voice. Something approaching backbone as he stares at Wilbur for a brief moment, then glances away. “From me.”

“... How gracious of you,” Wilbur grits out, and then holds his arm out. “Can I steal Tommy from you, just for a moment before the show starts?”

“I’m sitting with them,” Tommy’s quick to say. “In their box.”

“Right,” Wilbur says, that smile still painfully forced. “Well. I’ll be sure to get you back to them beforehand.”

Glancing back at Tubbo and Ranboo one last time, Tommy takes a breath and holds his head high. He thinks of the reflection he'd seen in the glass only a few moments ago, one of grandeur and power and strength, and reaches out to link arms with Wilbur. He smiles back at his friends ( *allies* ) and nods.

“Fine by me,” he says, and they walk.

## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

I MADE IT!!!!!! I DID IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! CHAPTER IS HERE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! in other news i tested positive for covid so i'll have lots of time quarantining to write. woooooooo :.) hahahahahahahHa Ha Ha

. anyways . BENCHTRIO! they're genuinely one of my favorite dynamics to write, and i find all their voices coming easiest when they're together :D especially here in cata- i love them so much!!!! do u like them? bc i do<3

-

if you wanna support me and my endeavors, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)



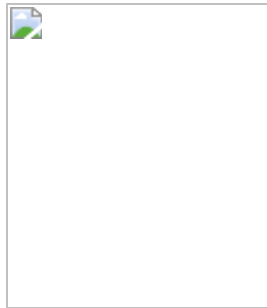
## arc IV. - you'll get just what you give

### Chapter Summary

twos: one brief implication of sexual abuse

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



“So,” Wilbur says, and Tommy can feel the eyes on his back as they leave Ranboo and Tubbo behind. “How are things?”

“Worse, now that you’re here,” Tommy says primly, and Wilbur laughs. He laughs! The prick. Tommy resists the urge to dig his fingers into Wilbur’s nice sleeve and instead, rips his hands away and off him, wiggling free. “What do you want?”

“Just to see how you’re doing,” Wilbur says. “I left without saying goodbye. Don’t tell me it didn’t hurt your feelings.”

“Why the fuck would I care?” Tommy asks.

“It was at least a breach of good manners,” Wilbur says, tipping his gaze to finally look at Tommy as they walk instead of scanning the crowd around them. “You’ve only had dreary Techno to talk to lately. Screw me for pitying you, then.”

“I don’t need your pity,” Tommy says sharply. “And I’ve been with Ranboo and Tubbo, for your information, and they are much more fun than you could *ever* be.”

Wilbur purses his lips, running his tongue over teeth underneath. “Well,” he says. “Thanks, I suppose.”

“I did not miss you one bit,” Tommy tells him. Wilbur sighs.

“You’ve made it quite clear, yes.”

Tommy is almost surprised by the tone of his voice— quiet, resigned, hurt— but he forges onwards anyways. “They actually listen to me, and don’t make fun but even when they do it’s funny, not hurtful. They’re smart and good and nice, and I refuse to let you ruin it.”

“Ruin it?” Wilbur turns. “How the hell would I ruin it?”

“I don’t know,” Tommy says, voice high and pitchy and whisper-quiet. An island in an ocean of people. Alone, with Wilbur at his side. “Maybe like how your family ruined *everything else in my life* .”

Silence. The ambient noise drifts around them, people whispering and laughter ringing brighter than bells. Tommy whips his head to the side— he’d know that laugh anywhere. Across the room, the Empress stands arm in arm with her husband, dark hair spilling like wine across her shoulders. Her dress, brilliant, mouth split open in a happy smile as she laughs. Tommy tries not to let his face fall further than it already has.

“The outfit’s a drag,” Wilbur says after a moment, swallowing. “A Libran gift? Smart of you not to say no thanks.”

“Hand-me-down, more like,” Tommy says, gripping the fabric of his heavy sleeves in hand. It’s thick— it slips through his fingers like oil, embroidery thread catching on his thumbnail before falling away. “What do you care, anyway? Prime, you’re such an overbearing bitch.”

“Excuse me?”

“I can wear whatever the fuck I want,” Tommy insists, holding up his head and taking a step forward to match Wilbur, toe to toe. “You heard Ranboo— it was a *gift* .”

“It is a *power play* , you both know what you’re doing!” Wilbur insists, all hushed-whisper voice and angry eyes. Tommy leans into it, giving him a glare right back.

“And? So what? What does it matter to you?” he asks.

Wilbur glares. “It means *everything* . You are under the Empire’s care right now, you should look like that, not like... this,” he says after a second, gesturing at Tommy’s entirety in a way that makes Tommy bristle.

“Well, I think I can look however the fuck I want,” he says.

“You’re not king anymore, Tommy,” Wilbur says, and it’s not a confident drawl of power, or a gleeful rag on his position. It’s desperate, it’s aching, it’s a quip designed to hurt and press buttons in the most painful of places. It makes Tommy stop dead in his tracks. “Stop trying to be.”

“Shut up,” Tommy whispers, staring out across the crowd. Wilbur stops at his side, one hand coming up to grasp his elbow.

“Wearing shit like this is going to bring unwanted attention,” Wilbur continues after a moment. “Everyone will be looking at you. It’s dangerous.”

“They’d be looking at me anyways,” Tommy says, tipping his head up to stare at Wilbur, eyes unseeing and filled with too much anger to care about much else. “Might as well piss as many people off as I can. You included. I’m not your *doll* .”

“Tommy,” Wilbur says through gritted teeth. “You’re under our protection. People know that. It doesn’t mean they won’t try anything anyways.”

“Maybe I want them to try things,” Tommy counters. He glances around the room. “It could be fun. More fun than being treated like some toy your dad got you in order to pretend like he isn’t ignoring you.” And there’s the return serve, a hit into Wilbur’s own psyche. It’s almost thrilling. (It’s definitely shameful.)

“Fuck you,” Wilbur spits, and they’re even now. Tommy grins, tipping his chin up at the prince and taking some righteous, glorified vengeance in the way Wilbur shudders with pride and anger both, the only reason he hasn’t struck out at Tommy likely being the fact they’re in the middle of a crowd.

“Your dad’s a neglectful bitch, and I’m not a king,” Tommy whispers, pleased at how red Wilbur’s cheeks are. “Glad to hear we’re on the same page.” He opens his mouth to continue the bickering, maybe fight Wilbur off, but before he can they come to a stop as a man in a well-fitted suit approaches them. Both of them snap to attention, the anger melting away from Wilbur’s face in a split second. Tommy stuffs a suffocating smile onto his lips and turns to look at the man as well. His face is... vaguely familiar.

“Excuse me, gents,” he says. “Highnesses.”

At his voice, Wilbur is now suddenly rigid. His hand, still on Tommy’s arm, digs in so hard he can feel his nails past the thick fabric. “And you are?” He asks firmly, and Tommy is once again reminded that Wilbur is a crown prince. There’s royal blood in his veins. He’s important too, though, and so he raises his chin high and waits.

“J. Schlatt, of Schlatt & Co.,” the man says, wine glass in hand and a grin that’s sly. Tommy suddenly knows why he looks familiar– Schlatt & Co. is a Continent-wide trading company. Their crates of merchandise are everywhere, and the man in front of them must be the owner himself. Tommy’s heard of him– never met him, but seen the occasional likeness or two. “It’s an honor to meet two of the Continent’s most important players at the moment,” Schlatt continues, holding out a hand, and Tommy blinks. Wilbur doesn’t shake it either. After an awkward pause, he drops it. “Just wanted to introduce myself, that’s all.”

“Right,” Wilbur says, then turns to face Tommy, golden eyes full of... something. “Tommy, I think the show is about to start soon. Why don’t you go find Ranboo and Tubbo so you three can get to your box?”

“Tubbo?” Schlatt asks, and doesn’t he know cutting in is rude? Tommy glares lightly. “Tubbo Underscore? I know that kid.”

Suddenly, interest.

“You do?” Tommy asks. Wilbur sighs.

“Sure do,” Schlatt shrugs. “He’s from the Underground, like me. I’ve known him and his siblings since he was a teeny bopper. Smart little bastard!”

“That’s one way to describe him,” Tommy mumbles. Schlatt laughs, loud and uproarious.

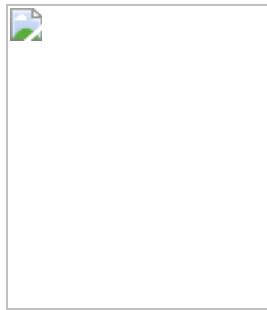
“Sure is!” He says. “Hey, Thomas— can I call you Thomas, yeah? Yeah. Thomas. Let’s talk again sometime, when there’s no show to get too. How long do you have in town?”

“I’m—” Tommy begins, but Wilbur cuts in.

“Tommy,” he says. “You should go.”

“Prime, what is with you?” Tommy asks, turning his glare to Wilbur and shoving his hand off his arm with a pointed look. “Fucking fine, I’ll go find Tubbo and Ranboo. Not two minutes back and you’re trying to do— whatever this is. Fuck off, your royal high-butt.” It’s an insult that doesn’t make sense, but it makes him feel better, and that’s all that matters. Tommy takes a breath, confusion whirling in his mind as he turns back to Schlatt and settles his face into something more neutral. “Pleasure to meet you,” he says on autopilot. “I’m not in town long, but you can field letters to me as you please. Enjoy the show.” Schlatt nods, and Tommy turns, taking one last moment to stick his tongue out at Wilbur before storming off to find his friends.

Fuck Wilbur.



Tommy leaves, and Schlatt grins.

The man’s eyes track Tommy’s golden head as he disappears into the thick of it, and then carefully notes the prince’s expression as he does. There’s a thin veneer of calm layered over something more desperate and angry— the two of them had been whispering furiously, spinning circles around one another before he’d downed his last sip of his drink, found another, and then approached. Now he’s just catching the tail end of whatever argument this was.

The young not-king had looked regal. Something about him seems confident; proud, tall, looking like the king he once had been. The circlet and outfit really make it, the splashes of green betraying his alliance even now to the Opus Isles, the jewelry on his head like a crown. Little Thomas Innes of the Isles is not a king anymore, but Schlatt’ll be damned if the kid didn’t radiate royalty. He’d been raised right; whoever had taught him stubbornness like that being someone to commend. Schlatt is good at reading a room, especially during parties. Hang out on a high balcony and look over the crowd, watching the way it shifts and changes.

People tended to hang around certain figureheads— the Empress and Emperor had a crowd around them, that’s for sure. A few military generals, some members of high society. He *supposes* the Underscore and council member that had accompanied the not-king counted.

Schlatt had to get closer, watching as they’d been approached once, and then twice by the fucking Crown Prince of the Empire, looking none too pleased.

He’s always been one to stick his nose in places it doesn’t belong.

“So,” Schlatt drawls, most of his formality gone now that the object of his attention has disappeared. The prince turns his gaze back to him, and openly scowls.

“Whatever agreements my father has with you notwithstanding,” he says, “you are not allowed a single word on this matter.”

“Jeez, kid, freak out much?” Schlatt asks, the hand not holding his drink splaying wide in a universal symbol of peace. “A man can’t introduce himself? You, or to your new little brother over there—”

“Not my brother.” Wilbur’s tone is sharp, and Schlatt raises his hands in surrender, eyes widening and lips pursing in mild surprise.

“Woah-kay, I see. Fine then, not the newest Watson-Soot royal brat. If you insist.” The merch’s face twists some, a smile creeping across his mouth and showing his teeth as he tips his glass of alcohol in the prince’s direction, tapping the rim against one gleaming silver button. “In that case, you know, plenty of ways to make him disappear. I know a guy or two—despicable types. Or there’s downtown, the brothels are always looking for baby faced—”

A hand lands on Schlatt’s shoulder, fingers curling tight enough to make his bones creak. He nearly yelps but keeps it in, staring down Wilbur’s furiously dark expression, and behind him, General Technoblade seethes silently. Wilbur pushes Schlatt’s hand away roughly, his own gloved fingers taking hold of his wrist and squeezing as well. The merch grimaces. Wilbur glares.

“You’re disgusting,” the prince spits. Schlatt scrunches his nose and smiles wider.

“And he says he’s not a brother,” he drawls, and Wilbur lets him go with a furious huff. A moment later, the grip on his shoulder relaxes as well and he shakes out the pain from the grips of two furious royal family members. “We should keep in touch, you and me. Good for business,” he says, rolling his shoulders absently. Prime the general is a fucking monster, eyes dark and heavy above the prince’s left side like some haunting, protective spectre.

“I don’t think so,” the prince says, and Schlatt shrugs, tips his glass forward again to gesture at him. “He is simply with us now, and that means we watch over him.”

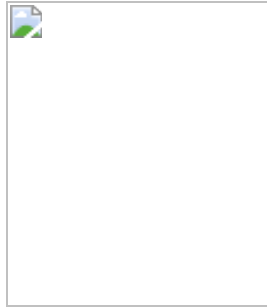
“And that’s best?” Schlatt asks, tipping his head. “Seems awfully confusing to me. In fact, it sort of seems like your father can’t make up his mind—”

“I’d watch your mouth,” Technoblade says lightly, but his face is dark. “Your status only protects you so far.”

“Threat noted,” Schlatt murmurs. He takes it as his cue to leave— he’s learned enough anyways, letting another small smile creep over his face. He gives a short, fanciful bow. “Well then, wonderful chatting with you, gents. I do think the show’s about to start. Schlatt & Co. thanks the Empire for their allowance of trade across their borders.” His grin widens. “*All* their borders.”

With a turn of his heel and a nod of the crown prince’s head, Schlatt returns to his spot high above the society milling about beneath him. He watches as the prince and general converse for a short moment, the prince’s eyes lingering on his father before he takes a breath, settles his shoulders, and heads off. The general lingers further— Schlatt knows his job is to blend in despite his formidable size and how he intimidates, but it’s easy to follow as he marks a perimeter around the laughing not-king. Thomas is back with his friends, arm in arm once more with a smile bright enough to challenge the sun.

Schlatt hums. His fingers itch.



Tommy’s never seen an opera before.

He doesn’t know what he was expecting— something interesting, maybe. Singers, definitely. The length? Yes. Thankfully he understands the language, to a certain degree. What he hadn’t expected was how fucking boring they could be.

“Don’t tell me you’re enjoying this,” he says to Ranboo, who’s sitting next to him in their own private box high above the seats. The stage is brightly lit, a dragon costume parading across it as a woman in a bright purple gown croons.

“This part is cool,” the boy whispers back to him. “They’re kulning to make the sea dragons quiet down and let their ships be.”

“That doesn’t even work,” Tubbo complains. He pulled some sort of mini toolkit from his pocket they second they’d sat down and has been fiddling with it since the curtain opened, although his eyes haven’t left the stage. “By the way.”

“It *does*,” Ranboo says insistently, hushed. “It’s like— it’s a good way, a good way to keep them under control.”

“Have you ever seen it work?” Tubbo asks, raising a brow. Ranboo shrugs.

“Are we referring to the giant scary sea monsters who sunk thousands of my fucking navy ships?” Tommy asks after a second, glancing down at the stage and the dragon there, fabric billowing as the notes rise high above the wooden floor. It’s creepy, in a way. Tommy’s not about to say it, but it is. “Is that what this story is about?”

“Only the first act,” Tubbo murmurs. “Oh, look, they’ve– the water mechanics.” Below them, the audience gasps and applauds as a spout of water shoots from the inside of the dragon’s mouth, and Ranboo claps mutedly.

“He’s seen this six times,” he says to Tommy, who hopes he looks as affronted as he feels.

“Six?” Tommy asks.

“Six!”

“S a good show,” Tubbo shrugs.

“It’s four hours long. And it’s all in Libran,” Tommy notes curiously.

“So?” Ranboo glances at him. “Can you speak it?”

“Can I speak it?” Tommy mocks, then a moment later in the language itself: “Of course I can speak it. I speak every fuckin’ language, you ginormous...” He struggles for a moment.

“Prick,” Tubbo translates.

“Asshole,” Tommy settles on. Ranboo bites his lip like it’ll help him stop snickering laughter.

“I’ll teach you better swears later,” Ranboo promises, and Tommy settles, if only because it might be worth it to sit through a four-hour-long opera about Libra’s creation mythos if it means he gets to learn curses at the end of it.

The show continues and Tommy gets steadily and steadily more bored of it. He knows this story– Queen Livia, one of the original monarchs of Libra who had given her life when her husband had offended the Ender Mother. She’d waited at the top of the stones at the lake’s edge at the equinox, blah blah blah, self sacrifice. Then some *prick* had come and kidnapped her before the Ender Mother could, and in anger, mountains had risen up and closed Libra off, shielded from the rest of the Continent. Supposedly, that’s where the giant sea monsters came from too.

Tommy thinks it’s a weird story, as far as most myths go. But hey, he’s a follower of Prime, so he’s really not allowed to say shit.

At some point, while Tommy is desperately trying to pretend like he isn’t invested, Ranboo shifts beside him. Once, twice, enough times for it to be annoying and Tommy turns to him, about to scold, but Ranboo is already getting up.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispers as he shuffles by, out of their plush seats and past the curtains, rich velvet behind them rustling as he disappears. Tommy watches him go, then

turns back to Tubbo, who he thinks might be entering some kind of coma state as he stares at the stage. He'd be worried, genuinely, if the other boy wasn't still fiddling with his tiny toolkit.

Tommy doesn't worry about Ranboo, either, until a few minutes have passed and he's yet to return. Yeah, it's a four-hour long show, but a bathroom break can't take too long.

He gives it another two minutes before he stands and leaves as well with a whispered "gotta use the loo" to Tubbo, who merely hums.

The hallway outside is cold and empty, lights flickering as they fight back the darkness from outside. Void of human activity, Tommy is alone. His footsteps echo, the faint noise of polite applause reaching his ears as he stares up at the dark, heavy curtains, around the corners of hallways. He tries not to be too loud, tries to remember the way he came as he explores a bit—intricately carved statues stare at him with lifeless eyes, some of them human, some of them reminiscent of mobs that once had been more common on the Continent and now only live where humans don't. He passes his hand over the side of one of them, the stone freezing under his fingers, and then pauses.

One of the windows is open, up ahead of him. Two double doors, the curtains drawn aside and letting in a draft. Tommy squints curiously, then steps forward until he's far enough to peek around the side.

The doors lead out to a balcony—one that looks over the view of the entire fucking city it seems, lights and streets brilliant below them. Against the railing is—

"Ranboo," Tommy says, and the other boy's shoulders jump. "Are you coming back?"

"Oh," Ranboo says, and there's something thick and upset in his voice that Tommy really doesn't want to touch with a ten foot pole. "Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah. I am. Gimme a minute."

"Sure, man," Tommy says, and leans against the door frame. They're silent for a minute, and then Ranboo heaves a sigh and turns to face him. He's not crying (thank fucking prime) but he's not standing straight, collar ruffled as though he'd been pulling on it.

"Okay," he says, still thickly, still... clogged. "I'm good."

Tommy raises a brow. "You sure?" He asks, and then steps out onto the balcony proper. The wind whips at his hair, kisses his nose, but it's warm. Promising springtime even in the night, and he draws his arms around himself and tips his head up to appreciate it. When he opens them again, Ranboo is staring at him strangely. "I'm just sayin', I could use a break too. The singing is cool and shit until you get about halfway through. Now I'm just bored."

"I don't know how everyone does it," Ranboo admits, voice cracking. "I— I mean. Pretending to like it and all. Except Tubbo. I think he actually likes it."

"He's weird," Tommy says casually and Ranboo barks out a laugh.

"I should probably be defending him," he admits.



“Don’t bother,” Tommy says. “Tubbo being weird is what makes him *likable* .”

“Fair enough,” Ranboo murmurs, and Tommy settles his forearms against the balcony railing, staring out at the lights and streets. Somewhere below them, a horse neighs. The silence stretches and Tommy resists the urge to fill it with inane chatter, stupid things that will make them both laugh. There’s a strange, unearthly aura around them both, like two fish plucked out of water and set on dry earth.

“I’m not good at this,” Ranboo says finally, and Tommy turns his head.

“No one is,” he says, although Ranboo hadn’t specified *what* he’s not good at.

“But I’m the worst,” Ranboo says, as though it’s an epiphany he’s just had. “I’m the— I’m like the pinnacle of awfulness when it comes to this. All this. You. Being friends. Having a fiancé, being what I’m supposed to be. I can’t be what I’m supposed to be. I’m even the worst at pretending like I can.”

“Now that’s a bit negative,” Tommy reasons.

“You saw the show.” Ranboo gestures inside with one arm, the other clutched to his chest as he hunches inward. “The Ender Mother, she— she knows what she’s doing, you know?”

“I mean, maybe,” Tommy says, tipping his head. Ranboo frowns. “Couldn’t she be pretending too? Like us?”

“She’s not pretending,” Ranboo says, sounding mildly affronted.

“Have you ever asked?” Tommy asks, and Ranboo blinks.

“Well... no,” he says.

“Then you can’t say she’s not,” Tommy says decidedly. “That’s that. Clean our hands of it.”

“You are ridiculous,” Ranboo mutters, but he’s smiling now, and so Tommy’ll take it as a win. Ranboo joins him at the edge of the balcony, tipping his face down to the ground and squinting. “...can I ask you a question?”

“No,” Tommy says. Then, “yes, of course you can, Prime I was *joking* ” when Ranboo stares at him with two blown-open eyes.

“...” Ranboo hesitates. “...how do you...do you ever...I mean, with everything that’s happened, how do you not...” He sighs, frustrated. “Do you ever feel like maybe they chose the wrong person?” He finally asks. “Like, when you were a baby and *you* became *yourself*, do you ever think they put the wrong person?”

“Now who’s ridiculous,” Tommy mutters, rubbing his face with one hand. “That doesn’t make sense, big man. What the fuck?”

“Like—” Ranboo sighs. “I was born to do this. I was chosen, pretty much the minute I arrived, right? I knew I wasn’t going to be anything else, and yet, now that I’m here...” He trails off

again. Ranboo has a habit of doing that, Tommy thinks. He doesn't mind. "...I'm not what I should be," he says after a long second. He turns to face Tommy again, eyes reflecting the light beyond them. "Don't you ever feel it? You were raised from birth for this too. I thought you might... understand, more than Tubbo might."

"Uh." Tommy glances back out over Vernal, shrugging. "I 'unno. I'm not quite sure *what* I feel these days," he admits, tipping his tone into joking for a moment but then sombers. "I'm pretty set on that, though," he admits. "On being the right person for the job."

"King?" Ranboo asks. Tommy nods.

"It's all I was and all I can ever be," he says, and Dream's voice pops into his skull like it always does and always *will* – make friends. "But I guess now that I'm... here. Sometimes. Sometimes I feel like everything was too big for my chest and now that it's finally seeing daylight, my ribs an' shit crack open. You ever had ribs, Ranboo?"

"Ew," Ranboo says, and his nose wrinkles in disgust. "Ew, no, what–"

"Not mine," Tommy says, laughing a bit. "Whatever."

"You're weird," Ranboo reminds him, and then rolls his eyes. "I guess I just– wanted to know if you ever felt like maybe you were never even supposed to be king."

"Nah," Tommy says, because *that's* the truth. "I knew what I was supposed to be."

"And you always managed to *be* it?" Ranboo asks. Tommy hums.

"No," he admits. "No, sometimes I was like– I fit a square peg into a round hole, yanno? I made it work, even if the corners got all scratched up and shit. You have to force the hole to adapt to you, sometimes, that's all."

"You were king, though," Ranboo says bitterly. "Kind of the supreme authority."

*I will be king again someday,* Tommy thinks to himself, staring at Ranboo, *and maybe you'll be there too.*

"Sure," he says outloud.

"So you didn't have other council members hanging over your shoulder," Ranboo reasons, and Tommy shrugs absently. He did have council– more than Dream even, he had a whole committee of them by his side and delegating tasks. "And they weren't prodding holes in your interests, and they weren't constantly criticizing you without thinking about how they say it. They weren't mean to you."

"I guess."

"I just want them to take me seriously," Ranboo says, frustration rising in his voice. Tommy sighs. They stand there.

“Sorry,” Ranboo mutters, a century later. “For– for just dumping that on you. Sorry. I’m sorry. We’re not even– I’m sorry.”

“I take you seriously,” Tommy says firmly in response. “I think you’re right. They’re overlooking you.”

*It’s what makes you the perfect in for me to Libra’s council.*

He could tell him right now. Come outright and say it: help me overthrow the Empire, Ranboo. Be one of my partners in crime, Ranboo. Help me commit treason, Ranboo. Instead, Tommy just gnaws on his bottom lip as Ranboo scrubs at his face with one sleeve. Tommy gets it. He cries when he’s frustrated too.

“But,” he continues, “that doesn’t mean they’re right about it. You’re way smarter than you give yourself credit for.”

“I can’t look at myself in the mirror some days,” Ranboo says with a wet sniffle. “How do you even manage?”

*Poorly*, Tommy thinks. “I just do,” he says. “Also, that’s kind of rude. I’m awesome.”

“I know, I know,” Ranboo says, waving a hand with a small laugh. “I’m sorry.”

“You are *not* forgiven,” Tommy says staunchly, crossing his arms and forcing the most petulant look onto his face. “Beg for mercy.”

“Absolutely *not*,” Ranboo counters. “I will not be doing that. No no.”

“I think you will,” Tommy says with a grin, crossing his arms tighter. “Beg.”

“No!” Ranboo says, laughing louder as Tommy reaches out to poke him with one finger, then again, and again. “Stop! I already apologized.”

“And I did not forgive you,” Tommy says, “did you not hear me? Fuckin’– deaf or some shit?”

“I’ll earn it back,” Ranboo says, and Tommy stops poking him. He smiles. “I promise.”

“I’ll think of some way,” Tommy says. “On my terms.”

“Sure,” Ranboo agrees, still smiling. Tommy wonders if this is what the devil feels like when he signs a deal with someone.

They go back to the box. Tubbo doesn’t seem as though he’s noticed their elongated absence– he just hums when they sit again, and Tommy tunes back into the show. Four hours pass, and too exhausted to do anything more than lightly bicker, Tommy finds himself in bed by the time the moon is past it’s high in the sky.

Libra is a pretty city, but they were never meant to stay for too long. The gauche presentation of it all sits heavy like a stone in all their stomachs, Tommy thinks. He also thinks the general is going to give himself an aneurysm if he keeps up the “stressed and overworked” couture he’s been heralding the past week. Before long, Tommy’s time in Vernal comes to a close, and he can’t say he’s sad about it. Not when he’s got so much more Continent to see, and when Ranboo and Tubbo gleefully inform him they’ll be accompanying him to the Vaults.

It’s early morning on the day they depart Libra when the door swings open to Tommy’s guest room, a lean frame darting through the small space before shutting it once more. Tommy is sitting at his desk, trying to wake up and maybe brush his hair on his own. Each day is a fight. Some are more... challenging than others.

“Letters for you,” Purpled says, hopping on his tiptoes as he stands beside Tommy with an arm outstretched. In his hands are two envelopes, and Tommy gives him a look before taking them.

“Thanks,” he says absently, turning them over in his hands. “Did you... are these *opened*?”

“Yes,” Purpled says, draping his arms over the back of Tommy’s desk chair as he starts to take the papers out of the first one. “I didn’t *read* them. I just wanted to make sure they’re who it says they’re from.”

“And?” Tommy asks, flipping over the first envelope. It’s got his full name and title on the front, heavy black ink and dark scrawling letters. There’s an insignia in the corner, one he recognizes.

“They are,” Purpled says. “Why is that merch writing to you?”

“Beats me,” Tommy says, scanning the letter. It’s long—about two pages of scrawling words and long jokes and even longer metaphors. But he thinks he gets the jist of it. “He’s offering me help.”

“Help? Help for what?” Purpled asks, sounding suddenly a lot more concerned. Tommy shrugs.

“Just in... general. It *literally* just says ‘in general’,” he says, and Purpled whips his gaze to the paper, reading where Tommy points his finger.

“You didn’t tell him, did you?” he asks, and Tommy is quick to shake his head.

“No, no, I didn’t tell him anything, what do you think I am, stupid?” Purpled scoffs, and Tommy scowls at him in the mirror. “Shut up!”

“I didn’t say anything,” Purpled says, leaning backwards.

Tommy rolls his eyes and turns back to the letter. “He mentions knowing some people in Raven’s Flight. Names.”

“Gimme it, then. When I leave I can bring the names to Dream and we can check ‘em out from there.”

“Fair enough.” Tommy hands over the first letter, envelope included, and then turns to the second. This handwriting he knows. It’s so achingly familiar. “Can you give me a minute?”

“Sure,” Purpled says. Before he leaves, however, he pauses by the door. “Oh, and the general told me to tell you to be ready by noon to leave.”

“Mhm,” Tommy mumbles, but he’s already lost in the words from Dream. Purpled huffs a sigh, and slams the door on his way out.

Tommy doesn’t care. There’s a certain type of nostalgia in reading a letter from Dream. The way he dots his *i*’s and crosses his *t*’s, similar to Tommy’s because he taught Tommy how to write, how to hold a pen or a quill and drag ink across paper. Tommy has shit handwriting, but as he likes to remind Dream, it’s not technically his fault. The letter is short and rambling, sentences too long for their own good and words coming in such a rush that Tommy can feel the gasping breaths one would have to take in order to get them across properly. Dream is like that— his mind runs a thousand paces a minute, and Tommy’s left scrambling after and picking up the puzzle pieces to fit them together. This letter is easy. It’s George and Sapnap and a squabble that left them with a hole burnt in their table. It’s Dream with a sketch of the castle in Raven’s Flight, a few vague ideas of getting in and out, and a reminder that Tommy should be making friends. He *is* making friends, thank you very much. He’s about to spend a few days traveling with them, actually. So that’s one bullet point checked off the list— even though he hasn’t actually asked them for their help yet or convinced them they could even pull something off like this, but that’s something for another day.

Dream ends the letter with a doodle of a dog Sapnap adopted and then promptly lost, then found again. Tommy smiles, leaning back in his seat and running his thumb over the dried ink where Dream has signed his name, and a little reminder of *I love you* above it.

Sighing, he sits back up. Re-reads the letter another time, then tucks it into his pocket and finds some ink and a pen, and spare paper.

Purpled won’t be joining him in the Vaults. He’ll be on his own with the royal family and Ranboo and Tubbo by his side. No other backup.

The letter he sends back to Dream is short, but full of *stuff*. Descriptions of Libra, promises for allyship, a mention of the letter he sent back with Purpled and the merch Schlatt’s offer for help. He leaves out the countess he’d encountered and that other man— Jack, had his name been? They seemed *too* eager to help, if anything. Too polite. He signs off his own name and some affectionate insults before packaging it up and sealing it, stuffing it in his pocket with the intent to hand it off to Purpled before they go. One look out the window— *shit*, it’s nearly noon.

Someone knocks.

“Tommy?”

“Yeah??” Tommy calls, then clears his throat as he grabs the letter from Dream and shoves it in his pocket too. He tries again: “Come in.”

The door opens, and Philza Minecraft Watson-Soot pokes his *stupid* head in.

“Carriages are ready,” he informs Tommy. “I figured I’d come fetch you myself, I’ve hardly seen you around— how are things? Did Techno not tell you noon?”

“He must’ve forgotten,” Tommy says, putting on the fakest, most ridiculously faux smile he can as he slips off his chair and tugs on his jacket. “I’m good. I’m ready now.”

“Alrighty,” Philza says, and then hesitates by the door. He hums. “Are you... how are you doing? I know I’ve been busy lately, me and Kristin both. If I had more time to spend with you, I’d be jumping at the bit, I swear.”

“What makes you think I want to spend time with you?” Tommy asks, some of that coldness seeping through. The more distance the Emperor keeps between them, the better. He’ll feel less guilt when he chops off his dumb head. But maybe *too* much chill comes through when he snaps back, Philza’s face falling for a moment. Tommy swallows, then shivers lightly and straightens his shoulders. “I— well. It’s fine. I’ve been in good company lately.”

“Underscore and Beloved,” Philza says, that hurt look fading away into another pleasant, less genuine smile. “They were excited when I invited them to travel with our caravan.”

“*You* invited them?” Tommy asks. He’s... more surprised than he thinks he should be.

“Of course,” Philza says. “Techno is a good friend, but you’re young, and he’s... not. Good to have people your own age hanging about, and I know you have been passing letters back and forth. They’re good friends to have. Good influences.”

Tommy thinks about Tubbo’s explosives and Ranboo’s insecurities. “...Sure,” he says quietly, then crumples his fist in his pocket and curls his fingers around the paper there. “Thanks?”

“Of course,” Philza says with a smile. Then: “You looked pleased about something when I came in.”

“Just eager to see what Tubbo’s been hyping up, honestly,” Tommy is quick to assure him, tucking his hands deeper into his pockets as he leaves the guest room for the last time and joins the emperor as they walk down the stairs. In his pocket burns a hole— traitor, traitor, traitor.

“Ah, well, we’ll be there soon enough,” Philza says, crow’s feet in the corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiles. Their feet bounce along marble floors, echoing for ages up the tall towers. Tommy thinks maybe it reaches high enough into the clouds for Prime to hear them. He offers up a prayer, his whispers bouncing alongside the sound of their feet. “Patience.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says as they step into the busy plaza, sunlight blinding him. “I’m trying.”

## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

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bit of a shorter one this week, but that's aight. we got some interesting conversations, some BondingTM happening!!!!!!!!!! relationships are growing and shifting! wonder what could happen next.... our time in Libra was short but it was valued<3 on to the next city!

what's your favorite location we've visited so far?

personally, mine is caterwaul, even though we spent EVEN LESS time there than in libra :) make sure you check out the map in the rest of this work's series!!!!!! it's one of my fav things for this au ngl, along with all the art !

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if you wanna support me and my endeavors, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

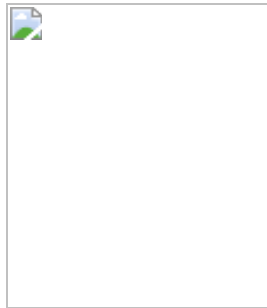
## arc IV. - the kinda shouldn't that mean that you should

### Chapter Summary

twos: none!

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



“I spy something... purple!”

“Mountains,” Tommy drawls, and Tubbo lets out a disappointed huff.

“*How* do you keep winning?” He asks. Tommy shrugs.

“You’re predictable,” Ranboo offers, and Tubbo reaches out with one hand to slap his bicep with an affronted look.

Traveling is boring. Tommy can admit that; the act of sitting in a carriage for days on end is not the most thrilling of adventures, even with the landscapes slowly passing by outside and the occasional walk alongside the caravan to stretch their legs. Traveling is boring, but can be made easier with good company, and Tommy is practically swimming in it now.

He’d almost been surprised by the fact they were letting him hang out with Tubbo and Ranboo so much, but he’s not going to say anything. No way! These two are his friends now—best friends, actually, thank you very much, and Tommy is going to soak up as much time with them as he can. He fucking deserves it.

“This game is childish,” Wilbur says from beside Tommy.

Good company, and, well, Wilbur.

They’d been shoved into one carriage together— the crown prince, the council member, the Underscore, and the disgraced king. Ranboo and Tubbo sit beside one another, Tubbo across from Tommy hanging upside-down on the seat as he peers out the window, face flushed red.



Wilbur is next to Tommy with a book in hand (Prime, he's a Technoblade-wannabe isn't he?) and Tommy is curled up beside him, leaning as far in the other direction as he possibly can. He'd had to shed his jacket earlier— their combined breaths mean the interior gets warm sometimes, especially as they travel farther and farther south. Tommy had been pleased to say that he'd started recognizing the landscape at one point, and had been the first one to notice when they'd arrived at Turnstones. Of the three port cities on the Continent's largest interior lake (Lake Lake, named by the locals), Turnstones was the smallest. But it stands as a barrier between something very important— the official boundary town between the Vaults and Empire. To their right stretches a forest of hazy green, and to their left a few purple-tipped rocky mountains, bordered by water on either side. Tommy's pretty sure this is where the story from the opera they'd seen was supposed to take place; Queen Livia and her abduction and the mountains, but he doesn't particularly care. He cares more about the fact that they turn *right* after a brief stop at Turnstones and a switch of horses, and follow the forest instead.

"Ooo," Tubbo says at one point, once they've stopped playing I Spy in favor of Tubbo and Tommy seeing how hard they can kick Ranboo without him immediately complaining. Tubbo has stopped now— he's peering out the window and Tommy is quick to join him, pressing so close their shoulders and then cheeks touch. Outside, the trees are thick. Tommy can't see past them after only a few feet, the darkness encroaching like some shifting monster. "We're almost to the Waypoint station."

"Thank prime," Wilbur moans, slamming his book shut with a loud *thunk*. "I'm sick of hearing you three whine to one another."

"You know we have to be quiet on the way in, right?" Tubbo asks, turning to look at Wilbur and jostling Tommy some as he does. "Even here. You can't complain."

"I'm not going to," Wilbur says, leaning back in his seat and closing his eyes. He looks serene. "I'm tired of babysitting. This silence will be a blessing."

"You're not babysitting," Ranboo scoffs. "If anything, *I'm* babysitting. You're just here."

"No, I am definitely the sitter," Wilbur corrects him. "With Tommy here? Absolutely."

"Fuck off," Tommy says, but he's too excited to be properly pissed off at Wilbur right now. They're almost to the Vaults. To Tubbo's home, and the grand Underground.

Yes, they have to pass through a very scary and very deadly forest first, but that's easy. Tommy's run a war effort before— he can handle this.

"How do the Waypoints work?" He asks, turning his head to glance out into the forest again. Lanterns line the road they're on, well-traveled and well-lit.

"Haven't you been here before?" Tubbo questions. Tommy shrugs.

"Yeah, but I was little," he admits, because he was. The last time he was in the Vaults he had been tiny— he can barely remember it, honestly. Just grey stone walls. "I've never seen it. Not the journey in, at least. No one explained."

“They’re like...” Tubbo runs his tongue over his teeth, thinking. “They’re like street signs, in the woods. But brighter, and they fend off the mobs. Waypoint guides are trained to recognize each and every symbol out of a book and it’s awful. I remember when Aimsey was learning. She bitched about it constantly. But it’s important ‘cause then the Guides can bring people through the woods safely and down into the Underground.”

“You know, they should just carve out new tunnels,” Ranboo says thoughtfully. “Has anyone ever thought of that? Y’know? Like just digging through the rock under the forest. Seems less dangerous.”

“You’ve clearly never been in a proper cave before, boss man,” Tubbo says fondly, slapping Ranboo on the shoulder before turning back to Tommy. “Don’t worry about it. There hasn’t been an issue in years, not since the Cataclysm, honestly. Mobs just hunker down these days.”

“Last time I was here our caravan got attacked,” Wilbur says, and there’s a gleefully malicious tone to his voice as all three of their heads whip towards him. Tommy glares.

“Shut up,” he says easily. Telling Wilbur to shut up these days is mostly reflex, but he’s never wrong.

“It was scary,” Wilbur hums, tipping his head to the side and peering out into the woods. His voice comes next, low and dreadful: “Everything went quiet and dark. Our Guide told us to hardly even breathe. We lost a horse and a guard was injured— zombie bite. He retired after that.”

The inside of the carriage is silent. Wilbur’s face splits into a grin.

“Well,” Tubbo says, hiding behind a strained smile. “I’ve come in and out my whole life and been fine.”

“Have you ever been attacked?” Tommy asks, turning on him. There’s a childish sort of fear in his stomach, but he thinks they’re all feeling it. Even Wilbur. Tubbo blanches.

“Well—” he says, then coughs. “Well, *yeah* .”

“Aww,” Wilbur coos, “don’t say that, you’ll scare Tommy. Are you scared? Hmm?”

“Shut up, bitch!” Tommy is *not* scared. He is nervous, maybe, maybe a little nervous, sure yes he can handle being nervous he’s been nervous before but he’s not *scared* . He turns, lifting his feet off the floor and planting the soles of his boots firmly on Wilbur’s legs, bracing his back against the wall of the carriage and pushing until Wilbur starts shouting at him. Tommy shouts back, of course, and then Tubbo is yelling at them both to quit it and Ranboo is sighing and then the carriage comes to an abrupt halt that has them all shuddering and nearly falling out of their seats. After a second the door swings open and the Emperor peers inside. Tommy stubbornly does not stop trying to squish Wilbur with his feet.

“You four are being awfully loud,” he says, eyes crinkling with amusement. “Come on. We’re here.”

Waypoint stations don't look anything like Tommy expected them to look.

He really doesn't remember his last trip to the Vaults— he'd been too small, and can only remember bits and pieces. He knows he can remember some of the architecture, he can remember Dream being there with him and one of the committee leaders, Sam. He can remember flashes of stone and some vague treelines, but that's... it. He doesn't remember the Waypoint guides or their stations inward. So color him surprised when they step out and find not just some shack on the edge of the woods, but a fucking boat.

It's as if they've plucked a ship straight from the ocean and set it down in the middle of the forest. Huge masts soar upwards in line with the trees, the creaking boards of the belly pressed into the ground. Multiple support beams sit against the ship to keep it from tipping over, and even then, Tommy can tell that it's listing despite it. A flag hangs from one of the masts— orange and gold, the Vaults shining through with clarity. Tubbo hums happily behind him as they all get out and stretch aimlessly, Tommy still staring at the ship.

"Good *Mother*," Ranboo says from behind him, cracking his neck loudly. "It's nice to have a break."

"You're disgusting," Tommy tells him, and Ranboo just shrugs as he stretches. Wilbur leans against the carriage, and Tommy turns his eyes back to the boat. There's a line of people coming off the gangplank, some of them with bundles or bags in their arms. People bustle around— it's busy, and not too many people are staring as they go about and do their business. Tommy turns back to their small group of people, curious. "How did they get a boat into the woods?"

"It sailed here," Wilbur says, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

"No, really," he insists. "How?"

"Ask Tubbo," Wilbur says, gesturing with his hand. Tommy turns, dead set on doing so, but Tubbo isn't looking at him. He's not even looking at the boat— he's got his eyes turned to the forest, squinting into the darkness.

"Tubbo," Tommy says, reaching out with a hand and poking him. "Tubbo."

A shriek cuts through the clamor. "TUBBO!"

Tommy reels backwards as something small and loud darts forward. Dark hair trailing behind them, a bright cap on their head as they dart between soldiers. Tubbo turns and grins, opening his arms just in time to catch the blur of a person in a crushing hug.

Tommy does his best not to feed the rising jealousy.

"Aims," Tubbo crows, spinning them both for a minute as his boots crunch in the dirt and leaves. "I wasn't sure you'd be here!"

“And miss this? Ab-so-lutely not,” the person says— and oh, it’s a girl; shorter than Tubbo, hair long and straight down her back, a clean shirt tucked into trousers and practical boots. Freckles darken her cheeks just slightly, and her cap is a bright, bright red in contrast to the rest of her. She turns, pulling away from Tubbo with a wide, lopsided grin. “Ranboo.”

“Aimsey,” Ranboo says, looking down on her with a smile. He dwarfs her, but all she does is take a few steps forward and give him a quick hug around the middle.

“Who the fuck are you?” Tommy finally speaks up, making sure to be as brash as he dares in the center of all these people. Which, of course, is *very* brash.

“Who the fuck are you?” The girl counters, whirling around to look Tommy up and down.

“That’s Tommy,” Tubbo says before he can answer. “He’s visiting.”

“With me,” Wilbur pipes up from behind, and the girl’s eyes widen for a moment before she lowers her head in a deep bow.

“Well excuse me, your Majesties,” she says, voice low and exaggerated. “My apologies for the crude language.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Tubbo chirps, slapping her on the arm.

“Tubbo’s definitely said worse,” Ranboo points out. The girl beams, taking a few steps forward to Tommy and peering up at him. After a moment, she holds a hand out.

“Aimsey Underscore,” she says lightly, friendly. Tommy regards her for a moment as distrust stirs in his belly, but she’s... got the same name as Tubbo.

Oh. He’s dumb.

“Tubbo’s sister from another mister,” she says happily as Tommy reaches out and takes her hand, giving it a firm shake. “Your Waypoint Guide for the trip, as well.”

“You landed this?” Tubbo asks, sounding impressed. “No, you didn’t, you’re fucking with me.”

“I did,” Aimsey says, turning to shoot him a glare. “Don’t sound so surprised, kid genius.”

“By yourself?” Tubbo asks. Aimsey rolls her eyes.

“Of course not,” she says, and Tommy takes a moment to realize this tiny sister of Tubbo’s will be leading them through the mob-infested magical woods. He blinks.

“Wait,” he says before he can stop himself, “how fucking old are you?”

“*Excuse* me?” Aimsey turns, crossing her arms and giving Tommy an affronted look. He blinks. “It is rude to ask a woman her age.”

“She’s four months younger than me,” Tubbo pipes up. Aimsey scoffs, turning to glare once more at him. “Sixteen.”

“An *adult*,” she points out. “Technically. And very good at my job. Don’t even worry about it. Plus, there’s two of us with you guys today. Your party is important.”

“Imagine if you got the emperor killed,” Ranboo muses. “*That* would be impressive.”

“Can we please not talk about that outcome?” Aimsey says, voice thick through gritted teeth.

“Please,” Wilbur says, pushing off the carriage with a long-suffering look. “If you get my dad killed, I’ll be emperor, and that’ll be no fun for anyone. When do we leave?”

“Oh, in a few,” Aimsey says, seemingly unconcerned with what Wilbur just said. Tommy is reeling—there’s so many voices around him and people talking, mixed with the background hustle and bustle of the station. He shuts his eyes for a moment, letting the noise wash over him—he hadn’t known Tubbo had a *sister*, or, had he? Hadn’t Tubbo mentioned multiple? Now he’s not sure, uncertainty rising. He’s got so much to do, including convince Ranboo and Tubbo to help him (although he thinks Tubbo will be the real challenge here, not Ranboo) and every new bit of information hitting him now, all at once, is making his veins itch like there are bugs crawling through them. Everything is just a little bit too much, and there’s still that lingering fear about their upcoming trek through the woods. His skin buzzes, and he jumps when a hand lands on his forearm.

“Hey,” Wilbur says, eyes on the chattering group of teenagers ahead of them. His hair falls over his forehead just so, and there’s a patch of scruff on his chin he must’ve missed while shaving. “I left my... glove in the carriage. Go get it for me?”

“Go get it yourself, bitch,” Tommy counters, but there’s a little bit of tension off his chest. Tubbo is giving him a questioning look across their circle, and Tommy blinks and subtly, shakes his head. “One second.”

The carriage isn’t far behind him, and Tommy turns, hoisting himself up and crawling back inside. It’s cramped and he has to duck his head and crane his neck in order not to bump his head as he searches for Wil’s glove. The sound from outside is dampened, and for a second Tommy just breathes.

They’ll be fine. Everything will be okay. Aimsey is an Underscore and a Waypoint guide *and* Tubbo seems to trust her, and Tommy trusts Tubbo, so it’ll be fine.

He doesn’t find Wilbur’s glove. When he hops out of the carriage a minute or two later after letting himself decompress, Wilbur is wearing both of them and grinning like the little bitch he is.

“Prick,” Tommy says, letting his displeasure shine clear as day on his face. “Fuck you.”

“Feeling better?” Wilbur coos, and Tommy ducks to avoid his gloved fingers ruffling his hair.

“Oi!” A shout draws their attention, and across from them, Aimsey is smiling.

“Are you ready to go?” She asks, tipping her head towards the woods. Behind her, Tommy can see the Emperor and General already on their steeds, Kristin’s carriage ahead of theirs and her face peering out from it. Another Waypoint guide— again with the silly cap, oh that must be their *thing* , innit— is standing up front, a horse’s reins in hand and waving.

“Oh shit,” Tubbo says. “Yep!”

“See you when we get home,” Aimsey says cheerfully, then bounds off to join the other guide. Wilbur is already clambering back into the carriage— with one last look at the landlocked ship, Tommy follows suit.

They’re back in the carriage and once again trapped, but Tommy’s okay with it this time. He curls up against the wall and watches out the window as they lurch into movement, the trees starting to roll past once more. This time, however, instead of staying the same, they start to get thicker and thicker until the underbrush is dense and beyond the first few feet, Tommy can’t see a single thing.

“You’ve done this before, right?” He asks, turning to look at the other three in the carriage.

“A hundred times,” Tubbo is quick to soothe. “Maybe a thousand.”

“Now he’s exaggerating,” Ranboo says. “I mean, c’mon, a *thousand* ?”

“We’re supposed to be quiet,” Wilbur points out, raising a finger to his lips. They all hush— outside, the carriage wheels thundering along and the occasional horse whinnying as they go. Tommy watches the window still, knees to his chest and making sure he’s breathing quietly.

It’s as if the trees block out the light, an eternal twilight settling upon them as they finally leave the outside world behind. Occasionally Tommy thinks he sees a flash of something deeper in the woods, but by the time he points it out to anyone else, it’s long gone. Whatever it is, it’s kept away by the lights of the caravan and quiet movement along the trail. Hushed whispers and galloping hooves, luminaires casting the road in shades of yellow like wheat ready for the harvest. It feels like sunset on an autumn day— quiet, unsure, worried for what the cold will bring.

Beyond them, the forest hums.

“Can you feel it?” Tubbo asks at one point.

And Tommy *can* .

It’s strange. It’s like a lightning bolt arcing along his fingertips, the purring of a thunderstorm before it actually arrives. The air is electric and Tommy knows everyone can feel it in how they shift and settle, Tubbo smiling a bit and Ranboo leaning his head against the back of their seats, breath coming in one long swoop. When Tommy looks at Wilbur, the older boy’s head is down, fingers loose in his lap and eyes shut.

“Hey,” someone says, and it’s coming from outside and Tommy jumps. At the window is Aimsey, her horse pulled along to match the pace of the carriage. She’s smiling. “How’s it

going?”

“Good,” Tommy says quietly. Around him, the world flickers and shifts and sings. “What’s that?”

“The forest,” Aimsey says, turning her head around to peer off into the trees. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Yeah,” Tommy breathes. “Yeah, it is.”

“We’re about halfway through,” Aimsey tells him, gesturing towards an approaching luminaire, the light casting long shadows over the lines of her face. “There are forty-six of these in total along the path. We’ve passed by twenty-four so far. We’re taking the quickest route in.”

“How did you become a guide?” Tommy asks, poking his head out further out of the window. He hangs out, into the fresh air, ignoring the voices behind him trying to get him back in.

“I’ve always wanted to be one,” Aimsey says with a smile, reins in one hand, a sword on her hip now that Tommy pays attention. “When I was little, I memorized the city streets, and kept trying to come up here and see the forest. So, I kinda just walked into it.”

“Is it always like this?” Tommy asks. “The fuckin’— the woods? The...” The unnamable satisfaction that seeps into his very core, hungry and intense and sweet? It’s pure magic, he knows it is, but it’s stronger than anything he’s ever felt before.

“Wait ‘til you get Underground,” Aimsey says with another wicked grin, raising one hand in order to lead her horse forward. Tommy leans back, watching as they ride forward. “You’ll love it.”

Twenty-four. Tommy pulls back into the carriage only after Wilbur tugs him so hard he nearly loses his jacket sleeve, counting the number of lights they go by until they’re in the single digits.

“We’ve got good luck,” Tubbo says as they pass by one more. The ambiance has settled in them all, Tommy no longer feeling like his very bones are vibrating with the energy around them. “Not a single peep!”

“Only took the mobs a hundred years,” Wilbur mutters, blinking his eyes open and turning to peer out the window alongside Tommy.

“You know, there *are* theories about that—”

“Bor-ing,” Tommy yawns, making sure to cut Tubbo off and grinning as the other boy’s foot flies out and kicks him in the shin. “What? I’m right.”

“Says *you* of all people,” Tubbo shoots back.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh look, we’re here, hurrah!” Ranboo says hurriedly, his tone rushed and breathy as he tries to push past Tubbo and get between him and Tommy. Whatever thing Tubbo was about to address fades to background noise as they all look outside, and Tommy...

Well, he’s not super impressed.

There’s a fucking hole in the ground.

“Is that...” He trails off. Wilbur nods.

“We’re going to go in there!” Tubbo says, kicking back with a grin. “Home sweet home.”

The carriage turns. Tommy can hear people shouting outside, but their view of the hole in the ground disappears back to just woods. He frowns, turning to Tubbo once more, but the other kid just holds up a finger and grins.

“Just wait,” he says.

Tommy turns his eyes back to the woods, and waits.

He’s not a patient person. But soon enough something appears— small wooden buildings along the edge of the hole in the ground, people rushing this way and that, the sound of hooves on wood as the carriage creaks forward onto something... else. Tommy watches as their trunks are loaded off and somewhere else, people coming this way and that in a rush of movement and coordinated chaos. The carriage comes to a stop. The horses are led away, and Tommy turns once more to Tubbo, who gestures for him to look. He does.

They’re horseless, carriage simply resting on a small wooden platform, the edge of which he can see underneath him. There’s a huge structure to their left, one he has crane his neck in order to see properly. Ropes and chains clank, and then with one big shudder, the wooden floor they’re on drops.

Tommy makes a *small* noise of surprise. He doesn’t shriek, shut *up* Wilbur, surprise and fear coursing through him and displacing the satisfaction he’d felt before. The wooden floor drops and the trees turn to stone to—

To—

“Holy shit,” Tommy whispers.

They’re floating. On chains and ropes, a wooden platform hoisted by a huge pulley system. Tommy can tell, because there’s another system across the way from them, another platform holding a carriage. And as they go down, the small holes emerge into something bigger, something far larger than Tommy can even imagine, a cave beyond understanding. The space stretches out and twinkling lights sparkle, huge stalagmites rising from the floor with giant swaths of green atop them. Below those, houses, streets, tiny people the size of ants crawling around, in and out of the earth. Bustling, a metropolitan underneath the crust of the Continent. Tommy stares with wide eyes, drinking it all in as they descend closer and closer to the cave floor. Houses and lights rise up into the walls, chains and ropes hanging from the



ceiling at points. Elevator systems course up and down the stalagmites, ambient daylight streaming in from the crumbling holes above and painting the whole city in blue tones. He can barely make out the shores of an underground lake on the far side of the cave, a huge crevasse ripping through the lower levels with bridges spanning it, lights hanging down into the void.

They take the plunge into the Underground, and for once in his life, Tommy is speechless.

“Look,” Tubbo says, scrambling to climb over Ranboo and join Tommy at the window. He scans the city for a moment, and then shoves his hand out the window and points with a finger. “That’s where my house is!” It’s hardly a speck in the distance, and Tommy squints. “And then over there, that’s the Spire. Below that is my lab, over there is Sam’s house, and wayyy past it over the gorge is the lake, where I was born.”

“Where you were born?” Tommy asks, and Tubbo shifts his arm to let it hang instead of point.

“It’s underwater now,” he says. The floor is slowly getting closer— Tommy realizes the system they’re on must be built for lowering things like carriages and heavy loads into the Underground, otherwise it couldn’t have been built. He’s still kind of impressed. “Since the Cataclysm.”

“Right.” Tommy squints at the building Tubbo had called the Spire, a tall tower reminiscent of the ones in Libra but made of darker stone, the top of which hardly comes close to the ceiling. In fact, the only things that nearly make it are the stalagmites with the huge stretches of greenery. “Are those plants?”

“Yep,” Wilbur says from behind them, before Tubbo can comment. “Surprising, right?”

“I didn’t know you could grow stuff underground,” Tommy says, a bit perplexed.

“They’re situated right under the skylights,” Tubbo explains. “They get the most sunlight, and even then they don’t give us nearly enough to feed everyone. Ingenious, though. I can’t remember who came up with them— Harper, maybe? They’ve been around for ages an’ ages.”

Some of the platforms are supported by long wooden poles, huge support beams criss-crossing this way and that. Some seem newer than others. Tommy can only guess why.

The floor is getting closer and closer, the people increasing in size from ants to beetles to dolls to people as they descend, the wooden platform creaking as they go. Tommy can hear people shouting as they approach and he cranes his neck to see below them, fingers gripping the side of the carriage and eyes wide as saucers, he’s sure. Sue him. He’s curious. This is awesome.

As they get closer to the floor, the light levels drop. Tommy has to blink, adjusting to the dimmer, homemade lamps as they land. The carriage jolts hard and Tommy’s nearly thrown backwards, but all four of them catch themselves. After a second, something unlocks the wheels and a person shouts, the carriage lurching forward and off the wood onto stone streets. Outside reminds him of a port, or the docks back in Caterwaul on the river’s edge; people

bustle this way and that, workers carrying loads on their backs or on carts, piles of wooden crates and boxes and trunks in such coordinated disarray that it makes sense without meaning to. It's a hive of activity, someone with a book darting past and hardly giving the carriage a glance as they mark something down in their catalogue. It really reminds him of the docks, actually. Almost identical except for the fact there are no boats here, only soaring elevators that climb high into the skylights above them, platforms disappearing into the pockets of bright blue left for Tommy to see. They are truly leaving the upper world behind as they lumber further into the elevator yards, the carriage rocking violently over the cobble.

"Prime," one of them mutters, and when Tommy looks back it's Ranboo, knuckles white as he holds on. "Can't we just walk?"

"Royalty, Boo," Tubbo reminds him, elbowing Ranboo in the side with a vicious grin. "Their feet are too weak."

"Oi!" Tommy scowls. "My feet are not weak. Stronger than Wilbur's at least."

"I'd rather be walking too, dickhead," Wilbur says through gritted teeth. He looks a bit green. "But unfortunately, it's not up to us. I don't think we're going far anyways."

"We're not heading towards the Spire," Tubbo says after a second, then hums. "Probably my house."

"Your house?" Tommy asks. "Like, as in, where you live?"

"Sure," Tubbo says. "It's our week for hosting committee meetings."

"You what?" Tommy asks. Tubbo grins, all teeth.

—

They do, in fact, end up at Tubbo's house. It's hard to see which house is which, exactly, because they all meld into one another in facades of dark stone and wood. Tubbo explains happily as they make their way down his street that a majority of housing is made of stone here to prevent fires from spreading— he tells them without much filter that they'd burnt down any wooden structures when the Red Cough had come into the city, the smoke lingering in the skylights for days and making the whole air hazy. Tommy wrinkles his nose and does his best not to think about it, glad when finally they stop in front of a grand few structures to the east of the Spire. Tubbo hops out first, Ranboo following close behind. Tommy actually clambers out last this round, sticking close behind Wilbur.

Even so far down, with the roof of the cave arching high above, the place almost feels claustrophobic. Like the whole city is in a bubble, just waiting for the world to close in on it. His chest feels tight when he thinks about it too much or looks up at the stony ceiling for too long, so he does his best to put it out of his mind. He sticks close to Wilbur as Tubbo and Ranboo bound out of the street and onto a sidewalk, up some stairs to where a man and woman are waiting. Tubbo eagerly throws himself into the woman's arms— and the man places a hand on Ranboo's shoulder with a smile. Oh. Family, then.

Wilbur's hand lands on his forearm, and absently hands over a small stone. It's cool under his fingers, perfectly round, and fits nicely in his palm. Tommy gives him a look.

"What?" Wilbur asks. "It was stuck in the wagon wheel. Thought you might like it."

"I'm not a bird," Tommy says, although when he holds up the stone to the street lights it glimmers when he turns it. Shiny. After a moment, he pockets it, and ignores Wilbur's self-satisfied smile. They follow Kristin and Philza when they appear from the next carriage up, and Tommy *thinks* those are Tubbo's parents who let them into the house before them.

"Your Highnesses," the woman says, a hand on Tubbo's shoulder now as they step into a modest but elegant foyer. "It's an honor."

"Thank you," Philza says, a smile beaming over his face, "for offering to house us while we visit. Your kindness won't be forgotten."

"The committees thought it might be fairer to have you stay in one of the inns by the Spire, but our house security is far more in line with your own tastes, I believe," the man says. "I'm Bo Underscore, and my wife, Anna, of course."

"Mum and dad, for those who please," Tubbo says with a grin, and all the adults in the room laugh. Tommy stares— they are almost a picture perfect family, aren't they? A mother and father and son, and—

"Mum!" Aimsey comes bouncing into the room.

"And our children," Mrs. Underscore says, smiling. Tommy watches Philza intently for his reaction. Kristin just smiles fondly, and the emperor does too. "They'll be out of your way I'm sure for the most part. There are more of them, somewhere. Figures they're late."

"Oh, it's no trouble," Philza says kindly, reaching out and shaking Aimsey's hand. "Your daughter led us to the Underground safely, after all."

"Besides," Kristin says, looping her arm with her husband's, "I've missed having little ones around, and your children are exceptional."

"Please," Mrs. Underscore says, her cheeks slightly red. "Your words mean more than you can imagine."

"Can we show you to your rooms?" Mr. Underscore says. "I believe my head of security is talking with your general outside— things should be settled in that regard."

Tommy does not miss how all eyes in the room flick to him. He tries not to be irritated by it.

"That sounds lovely," Kristin says, breaking the beat of silence that had fallen across the room. She lets go of the emperor's arm in order to cross the room, Tubbo ducking out of the way as she does and coming back around to meet Tommy. He reaches out and Tommy gladly sticks his hands in his friend's, watching with narrowed eyes as the adults move into the hall and continue chatting lightly, a formal, happy air around them.

“We’re sharing,” Tubbo says cheerfully.

“What?” Tommy asks. Confusion bubbles in his stomach, a gaseous cocktail of longing and uncertainty and probably some motion sickness left over from the bumpy ride they’d had down. Philza and Kristin are— they’re a king and queen, and Tommy was a king and Ranboo is a council member but they’re just... staying over at Tubbo’s house? With his family, like it’s no big deal?

Aren’t they supposed to be a big deal? In Libra they were, and it was... suffocating. Here, he feels the opposite extreme, like he’s floating in every direction at once.

“We’re *sharing*,” Tubbo says again with more emphasis. “A room? Have you ever shared before?”

“No?” Tommy hasn’t. Not properly, anyways. He used to crawl into Dream’s bed before he got too big for nightmares, but that was a long time ago.

“Well, sucks to be you then, because all three of us are sharing,” Tubbo says bluntly. He leans in, conspiratorial. “Ranboo snores.”

“I do *not*,” Ranboo says from across the room. Tubbo shakes his head and mouths *he does*.

“Sharing a room,” Tommy repeats. He’s never shared before. He’s not sure what it entails. Tubbo grins.

“Like a sleepover!” He says happily, and then moves to tug Tommy’s hand along and gestures for Ranboo to come, and if Wilbur and Aimsey trail along behind too then he doesn’t say a thing. Tommy’s head spins, but his chest is light and he’s floating, but it’s not the bad kind of floating.

He’s happy.

That’s... weird.

The feeling stays as Tubbo drags him through hallways that are stately but homely, portraits lining the walls and carpets worn by the feet of many people. Rich reds and dark wood trims, up narrow staircases and copper door handles that shine in the yellow lantern-light of the house. At one point, a young girl in trousers comes bolting down a hallway and Tommy barely has time to jump out of the way before he gets trampled by another girl, this one in a skirt and apron stained with grease, shrieking.

“Crumb and Lani, stop it!” Tubbo shouts after them. “We have guests!”

“Hullo, Ranboo!” The one in trousers yells as they wheel around the corner. Tommy laughs before he can stop himself, and catches Tubbo’s eye as they ascend yet another fucking staircase.

By the time they’ve reached the last landing, Tommy is out of breath and they’ve lost both Aimsey and Wilbur by now, but Ranboo is stubbornly climbing the stairs along behind them.

They pause for a moment and Tubbo straightens his collar, brushes his hair back, and then nods.

“Alright,” he says, then nods again. “Alright! This is my room.” If Tommy didn’t know any better, he’d say Tubbo seems nervous as he reaches out and nudges open the door with one hand, the other still firmly in Tommy’s grasp.

The first thing he notices is the window. It’s a large, square thing, gleaming copper with a desk underneath the right side of it and open space for the sill on the other. Across from them is a view of what seems to be the entire Underground, lights shining and the skylights clearly visible. The rest of Tubbo’s room is... unremarkable, truly. There are gadgets and burn marks on his desk, a hastily made bed in the corner and bookshelves lining one entire wall. Papers scatter across the floor, and Tubbo hops along the carpets and into it. Tommy steps in next, letting his hand drop from Tubbo’s in order to look around.

“It’s nice,” he says eventually. Tubbo squints at him. “What? What do you want me to say? It’s— it’s fuckin’ small?”

“Rude,” Tubbo says, but he doesn’t sound too hurt by it so Tommy takes it as a win. He steps up to the window, peering out as the streets bustle beneath them. He can see their carriages and trunks, workers bringing them into the house via a different door than the one they’d entered. When he looks up, he can nearly see the sky.

“I like the window,” he says. “Big, innit?”

“Oh, the window’s the best part,” Tubbo says, and Ranboo has flopped onto the bed at this point and is absently playing with a small wire frog. “Huge! I’ve climbed out of it a million times.”

“Your parents don’t care if you go anywhere,” Ranboo drawls. “Why do you need to climb out of it?”

“It’s about the thrill, boss man,” Tubbo informs him. There’s another feeling rising in Tommy’s throat now, one heavier than the friendship he’d been feeling in the hallways— this one, he knows the taste of well. Bitter jealousy digging deep into his sternum, sharp, like a carving knife lodged firmly in his chest.

It seems ridiculous for Tommy of all people to be jealous of Tubbo’s tiny, messy room and his parents who love him and don’t care if he climbs out of his window. Ridiculous that he turns and catches a glimpse of Tubbo’s messy hair and scars and feels only a vicious *want* for the type of outlook on life Tubbo holds. Because he shouldn’t want it— he’d told Ranboo not days before that he was sure of his place in life, his claim to the throne, his birthright. Tommy knows what he was born to do and he knows he does it well.

So the jealousy is strange and unfounded. Confident in this revelation, Tommy takes the carving knife and shoves it down into his stomach, down until he can’t feel the pain anymore except as a dull throb. Jealousy is not befitting of a king, even if the king isn’t king anymore and needs to work on getting that title back, actually. Speaking of.

“It’s pretty awesome,” Tommy says, letting a grin split over his face. “The whole thing. Your parents— they’re bold, just walking around like that next to Philza and shit! Offering to let us stay? Crazy!”

“They are definitely a little nuts,” Ranboo agrees, nodding serenely. Tubbo rolls his eyes.

“They’re cool,” he says. “They were both on committees— engineering, for my dad, academic for my mom, but now they both just contribute to universities. We still host committee shit and guests though, ‘cause the house is big and pretty central. Oh! Speaking of— we should go out! Go for a walk? I can show you some cool places and we’ll be back by dinner.”

“Are we—” Tommy hesitates, because he wants to, yes, but... “Are we... allowed?”

Tubbo gives him a look, eyebrows drawn in and eyes glinting. “Does that matter?”

(Prime. Tommy might have an easier time with both of them than he thought.)

“Hm.” Tommy brings a finger up to his chin, tapping it. “Well. You know. Thinking about it...” He taps once more. “Absolutely the fuck it does *not* matter.” It’s been a while since he’s snuck out anywhere, the last time being with Wilbur. So what if they give everyone a little heart attack, it’s been far too long and their guards have been let down. Tubbo is grinning and Ranboo is sighing, so that must mean the plan is a-go.

“You know what this means,” Tubbo says, and Ranboo groans. Tommy blinks.

“No?” He asks.

Tubbo turns and looks out the window. Tommy follows his gaze, then his eyes catch on the latch and Tubbo laughs, and, oh! Oh!

“We’re going out the window!” Tubbo crows. Tommy can’t help but join in with him and before long, they’ve danced themselves in a circle with their battle cries. Laughter is infectious and Tommy is anything but immune, loudly shout-singing nonsense with Tubbo as they bounce around the room. Ranboo is laughing too by the end of it, and Tubbo throws open the latch with grandeur and grace, swinging one leg over the ledge. Tommy follows— he peers down at the streets and the tiled roof below his feet and for a moment, feels alive. Just for a moment. He feels like he’s back home, sneaking out for the thousandth time and avoiding the guard and Dream like it’s a game.

Who knows when he’ll get to experience something like this again, once he’s dragged back to the Empire and it’s cold walls? Tommy’s going to be busy after they get back too, when everything will hang heavier on his shoulders. He gets to be a kid now, and he’s alright with that.

...even if they’re quite high up.

But Tubbo shows him all the best handholds, the best places to put his feet so they don’t slip, and before long they’ve scaled the rooftops and slid down a smaller roof to another ledge and then, finally, onto the streets.

“I hate this,” Ranboo is saying, a mantra he’s been mumbling the whole time. “I hate you, I hate this, I hate—”

“Everything, we know,” Tommy cuts in, rolling his eyes. He’s excited, practically bouncing to get moving. “Pessimist, much?”

“Out of the three of us, I really don’t think I’m the pessimist,” Ranboo says, and Tubbo gives Tommy a shove from behind to start walking, so he goes.

The sidewalk is stone under his feet and everywhere he looks is stone, stone, stone. Lamp posts on every corner, carriages in the streets and horses leading them along. People, too, people who don’t give them so much as a second glance before heading on their way. The Underground seems enamored with anonymity, and Tommy isn’t wearing anything fancy so the thing is, with Tubbo and Ranboo at his side, he looks normal.

He looks like any other slightly-richer-than-normal kid, out with his slightly-richer-than-normal friends. Laughing together, arm in arm.

He wants to keep this.

It’s a desire that hits him so suddenly he nearly stops in his tracks. He wants to keep this, to keep the freedom and laughter that comes with being with Tubbo and Ranboo. This friendship is nothing like he’s ever felt before, not even with Dream. He wants it, desperately, aching so. And he will do anything to keep it, he decides. Right then, right there, Tommy swears an oath to himself: he will keep this feeling somehow, no matter what. He’ll do what he has to, no matter how monstrous.

“Tommy?” Tubbo asks, cutting through his internal monologue. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” Tommy’s quick to soothe, ducking forward a few steps to match with them again. “Just taking it all in.”

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Tubbo asks, spinning in a circle. It’s... something. That claustrophobia is still there for Tommy, but it’s easy to shove aside. Tubbo’s eyes catch on something across the street as they walk, and mischief glimmers for a moment before he’s dragging them across the street and next to a cart. A cart that bears all sorts of foodstuffs, including...

“Ew,” Tommy says, regarding the impaled bugs on wooden sticks with a grossed out look. “What the fuck is that?”

“Scorp’o’stick!” The man behind the counter says with a grin. “I caught ‘em myself!”

Before Tommy can express his utter revulsion, Tubbo has one in hand and is slapping a coin down on the counter.

“Thanks!” He says happily, holding the stick out to Tommy with a look far too gleeful to be anything but dangerous on Tubbo. He smiles like he’s got gunpowder in his teeth. Ranboo

has a hand over his mouth, and so Tommy can't tell if he's smiling or not. "Come on," Tubbo says, smile drooping a bit. "It's good, I promise. A classic Underground special."

"Tubbo," Tommy says, wrinkling his nose. "What the fuck."

"If you don't, I'll be really, really sad," Tubbo says, and after a second, Tommy takes the little wooden skewer in between his forefinger and thumb. "And I'll tell all my sisters you refused to eat it, and they'll bully you forever."

Well. There's only one choice now.

"This is so gross," Tommy says, holding his nose as he brings the pink bug closer to his mouth. "Please, I don't want to."

"You have to now," Tubbo says with that gunpowder grin. "I bought it and everything!"

"I have so much money," Tommy reminds him. "I can just— pay you back or some shit, Tubbo, c'mon." The bug is staring at him with wide, dead, cooked eyes. Ranboo chuckles, but shuts up when Tommy shoots a glare his way. "Tubbooooo."

"C'mon, boss man," Tubbo says. "Here, how about this? If you take a bite, I take a bite."

"This is so unfair," Tommy groans, and then with tiniest, most delicate movements of his mouth and teeth, pulls a bit of bug off of the stick and swallows. It's barely anything, yet his stomach turns slightly and he feels the ever-familiar looming nausea in the back of his spine. "Eugh. Eugh! Gross!"

"You hardly had any!" Tubbo scolds him, before reaching out and snagging the stick from his hand. "Pussy."

"Bitch."

"Wanker."

"Shitstain."

"One of you eat it," Ranboo says with exasperation. "Ohhh my god."

"Shut up, sass-boo," Tommy tells him happily, and Tubbo crows in with a *yeah! get his ass!* before taking the largest bite *ever* of the bug on the stick. Tommy nearly throws up just watching him. "Prime, Tubbo, what the hell?"

"Mmm," his friend says through the mouthful, smile spreading over his face. "Tasty."

"You're fucked up," Tommy informs him. Tubbo just takes another bite. He turns to Ranboo— "Your husband is fucked up."

"Fiance," Ranboo corrects. "He likes this stuff, the bet was rigged."



“Oh, fuck you!” Tommy turns back to Tubbo. “Of course you like bugs on sticks! Mmm! Delicious! Tastes like— chicken, I dunno!”

“It kind of does,” Tubbo says, and then the bug is gone because Tubbo eats the rest of it in one go. Fucking madman. Tommy makes his thoughts on this well-known as he audibly gags. “Don’t be insensitive, boss man. This is my culture.”

“That is a bug,” Tommy tells him.

“And you’re a dumbass,” Tubbo snaps back, but it’s good-natured and Ranboo is snickering behind the both of them.

Tubbo discards his stick, and they keep walking. Tommy is still a bit put off by the bug, even if Tubbo tells him it’s actually a species of crawfish or something like that— like lobster, but smaller, and different. Also blind, apparently. Tubbo talks a lot about the Underground as they walk, pointing out the smallest of details Tommy would have skipped over but seem obvious when Tubbo brings them to attention. By the time the lights blink six times (like clocks, Tubbo says, but they just tell the hour, not the minute) they’re giggling over something stupid, packed along a crowded street corner and watching a lightning bug flicker in between Ranboo’s caged fingers. Tubbo glances up— Tommy watches him, then glances up at the nearest lamp post.

“Oh, shit,” Tubbo says casually. “We’re gonna be late to dinner.”

“Oh fuck,” Tommy says, and then they’re bolting.

It’s not that he’s scared. Not of Philza, not of Technoblade— not anymore. They’re no longer the boogeymen of his dreams, even if he acts like it some days. He’s just feeding off the nervous energy of all three of them (although, punishment from the emperor doesn’t *not* cross his mind. They won’t be in the Vaults forever) as they race down the streets, the wide, open cobblestones eagerly welcoming them back as Tubbo flings them all up the stairs and into the house through the front door. Ranboo is laughing and Tommy breathes, chest heaving, when someone clears their throat behind them all. They turn.

It’s the older girl from earlier in the hallway, dressed much more fancy, arms crossed.

“Lani,” Tubbo says. “Hi.”

“Mum told me to get you for dinner,” she says, staring them all down with only the intimidation an eleven-year-old girl can muster. Tommy feels... intimidated. “I couldn’t find you.”

“We were just in my room,” Tubbo says innocently. Tommy nods. Ranboo shuffles his feet. He’s such an awful liar, what the fuck.

“I looked in your room!” Lani cries, and Tubbo shrugs.

“Rest of the house, too,” he says, and despite the knowing look on Lani’s face, she doesn’t say anything else. Instead, she tugs them along and it turns out they’re not *too* late. Dinner

proceeds, and despite the incident earlier with the... bugs, Tommy's stomach is just as voracious as ever. Conversation flows light and unimportant between them all, and Tommy meets the rest of Tubbo's siblings properly— there's a toddler named Michael, Lani and Crumb, an older teen named Teagan and then Aimsey, with Tubbo loudly proclaiming himself the oldest. Tommy is sitting next to Wilbur, who elbows him at one point after Crumb spills an entire glass of something dark down Teagan's dress.

"Isn't it nice to be an only child?" Wilbur asks, voice low to keep it between them both as Mrs. Underscore fusses with a maid over Teagan.

"What?" Tommy asks. "I— I dunno." The chaos is kind of fun.

"Mm." Wilbur leans over and snags his own drink, lifting it to his lips. When he brings it down again, he's smiling. "Yeah, I guess I've always kind of wanted a brother."

Tommy stares at him, and then scowls, turning away without another word. Kristin meets his eyes from across the table and Tommy scowls even deeper at her before paying attention once more to his dinner, digging in without a care to manners and shit like that. This house is weird enough. He doesn't need Wilbur being a bitch either, although that's standard by now.

Dinner passes mostly without incident, although by the time they tuck in the city is still lit up. Tubbo sleepily explains that the street lamps never go out anymore— and then, all three of them crash. Tommy and Ranboo in makeshift beds brought in during dinner, Tubbo on his own. Tommy can't see the stars, only the dark stone of the ceiling just beyond the window, but it doesn't bother him as much now that he's explored a little. The day has been long and within minutes, he finds himself drifting off.

He dreams of scorpions and fireflies.



Somewhere in the distance, a bell tolls, long and high and deep. Such a loud clanging sound startles Tommy out of a deep sleep, stumbling out of bed in a panicky haze. He comes to a stop in the middle of Tubbo's dim, messy room, arms outstretched and chest heaving. He glances down. Tubbo blearily stares up from his own sheets. Over on the other makeshift bed, Ranboo throws his arm over his eyes and groans.

"What's going on?" Tommy asks, voice a little too high-pitched, and Tubbo blinks, lifting a hand to rub at his eyes. A second later, sleepily, he yawns. Completely at ease. It settles Tommy's shoulders, although the bells keep tolling in the distance.

"embrace day," he mutters. Tommy stares at him, then gestures for Tubbo to *go on* with one hand. He doesn't know what that means. His friend takes the hint. "Remembrance Day. It's the fifteen year anniversary, boss man. Jeez, I forgot we'd be back in time."

"Oh," Tommy says. Tubbo rolls out of bed onto the floor with a thump. Right. Fifteen years since...

"Happy birthday!" Tubbo chirps after another moment of hesitation from his spot on the floor.

Right.

## Chapter End Notes

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE!! ALL ART FOR THIS WORK HAS BEEN MADE BY THE INSANELY TALENTED [CEREBELLUM CROW](#)!!!!!!!!!!!!!! MAKE SURE TO GO DROP HIM A FOLLOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

happy birthday tommy :) iykyk.....

ahrhghhghhhhh this chapter my BELOATHED it was so hard to finish and if it feels rushed in some places and im so unhappy with the characterization, i am so sorry. i've had a hard time keeping up with the grind and also working and back to school so i might take another week off in the future hhhh.

in other news, the chapter count has been upped a bit! i'm giving myself some leeway, but i think 24 to 25 chapters will be the end goal :)

to all my new readers from tiktok- hi!!!!!! nice to see you!!!!!! im so happy you're here, and you should check out some of my other work while you wait for this one to upload!!!! :D

-

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be

awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for-  
yeah okay)

## arc IV. - a most curious thing

### Chapter Summary

tws: dicussions of grief/nostalgia/major disasters

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy sits at the table for breakfast, and everything is quiet.

Well– that’s a lie. Apparently, nothing is ever quiet at the Underscore household. The baby of the family (a toddler named Michael with one pale, milky eye not unlike Tubbo’s) is currently squabbling with one of the nannies and Mrs. Underscore over his food, yet *another* sister named Teagan arguing with Lani, and Crumb singing softly in the corner to herself as she eats. (There’s six of them. Six siblings, including Tubbo. What the fuck. Tommy can’t even imagine!) Wilbur doesn’t appear to be up yet, missing from the group. All in all, Tommy’s honestly had worse breakfasts, but this one is still quiet. Words are spoken but nothing is said, and the air in the room stinks with a quiet sort of mourning that can’t be said aloud.

It’s weird.

“Any plans for today?” Mr. Underscore asks at one point, a smile crooked and lopsided and kind. Tommy blinks– is the question aimed at him? The answer comes when Tubbo replies.

“Ahh, maybe. Dunno. Gonna go out and show Tommy my workshop, maybe drag him down to the gorge.”

Tommy glances over at Philza and Kristin, who are surprisingly just... sitting and having breakfast. Kristin gives him a smile and Philza, a nod.

Approval, then.

“That’d be fun,” he says, and Tubbo beams.

“It will be fun,” he chirps happily. “I’m excited!”

“Remember to stop by the lakes,” Mrs. Underscore says, the toddler now on her hip with food plastered across his face and an unhappy look. “By tonight.”

“Yeah, mum.” Tubbo rolls his eyes.

“You’re lucky you don’t have to bring everyone along with you this year,” she teases, and Tubbo shrugs, poking his fork at his plate with a grimace.

“The lake?” Tommy asks, and even Ranboo makes a questioning noise.

“Oh,” Tubbo says. The whole table goes quiet— even the younger girls stop their chatting and glance over. Tommy sinks back in his seat and he can feel his cheeks burning. After a second, Mr. Underscore answers instead.

“Every anniversary we go and leave candle boats on the lake,” he explains. “It wasn’t always a lake, of course.”

Tommy can feel his face go even brighter red, his ears on fire, and he sinks even lower in his seat. Ah right— how could he forget? All those people dead, and here he is thinking about having fun.

“Bo,” Mrs. Underscore says, her eyes off of Tommy and on her husband now, voice gentle and almost... amused. “Do you remember when we were children? There was that path into the gorge in the lower levels, where we’d climb the walls like spiders and back up to the top.”

“Oh, prime.” Mr. Underscore laughs after a second. “Yeah, I do. I think I was seven when my brother took me? Right bonkers of us all— those cliffs could give way any minute. I don’t think any kids these days even *think* about climbing down the gorge.”

“Definitely not,” Aimsey mutters from where she’s half-asleep, chin tucked in her hand.

“We had a similar thing,” Philza says out of the blue— Tommy turns to look at him, and he reaches up to scratch aimlessly at his chin, eyes lost in thought for a moment. “In Osprey. Cliffs, down on the east side of the city that led to a mountain path. I always heard that kids would go climbing there. Even when it got cold they never wore gloves, because they wanted to feel the grooves in the walls. That cliff’s gone now, but there are bound to be more.”

“Did you ever climb?” Mr. Underscore asks.

“No,” Philza says, but then raises his brow and nods enthusiastically. Kristin gasps— reaches out, slaps his arm, and the table laughs.

Tommy stays quiet.

It’s strange, hearing them talk. Stories of what it was like before, before the instability and the famine and the wars. Back when food was plentiful and people were happy and safe, no worries about cliffs coming tumbling down on their heads other than the normal rocks and pebbles. No vigils to attend or candles to light; Tommy can’t imagine a world without it, and based on the looks Tubbo and Ranboo are throwing his way, they can’t either. This creeping nostalgia that grips the conversation is completely foreign, and Tommy can only just sit and listen as it washes over them all. It’s like looking back at a cracked mirror and not recognizing the shattered pieces of a reflection— Tommy has no idea what it will be like, and he knows it’s true for anyone around his age.

“Mum,” Tubbo cuts in at one point, during a lull in the conversation. “May we be dismissed?”

Oh, thank Prime.

“Yes, dear.” Tubbo is on his feet in two seconds— Tommy is quick to follow and barely looks at the Emperor and Empress as they go, Ranboo behind him. “Remember—”

“Spire to get the candles then the lake. Yes, mum.” Tubbo sounds exasperated, but he smiles as she catches him by the arm and plants a kiss on his cheek.

“Have fun,” she says. Tubbo hums, and passes Tommy by to get to the door.

“Tommy,” someone says before he can leave, and he pauses on the precipice of it, turning to glance and look back. Philza is smiling at him, and Kristin is too.

“Enjoy the city,” she says. “And happy birthday.”

“Happy birthday,” Philza tells him. Tommy looks between them both, and then without a word, turns and leaves.



“That was kind of rude,” Tubbo remarks as they make their way down the street. Tommy scoffs.

“Fuck them,” he says, kicking a stone and watching it clatter through the roadway until coming to a stop. Ranboo laughs, but hides it in his elbow. “No, seriously, fuck them!”

“All they said was happy birthday,” Tubbo points out.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “*Immediately* after they talked for like twenty minutes about what it was like in the good old days, like the old people they are. The good old days that everyone thinks I caused.”

Silence. Tommy scowls at his feet.

“Not everyone thinks that,” Ranboo says half-heartedly. Tommy scoffs. “No, really! Lots of people know it’s just... rumor.”

“But they know,” Tommy insists. “It’s not exactly a state secret when my birthday is.”

“Plenty of babies were born today,” Tubbo reasons. When Tommy looks over at him, he’s tapping his chin. “Hell, I bet it could’ve been any one of them! Not just you. You just get all the blame ‘cause you’re in the public eye. Maybe the real cause of the Cataclysm is... Joshua, a farmhand from...I dunno, buttfuck nowhere?”

“Joshua from buttfuck nowhere can suck my dick,” Tommy says primly, and that sends Tubbo into hysterics. Ranboo even lets out a barking laugh— hah!

“Don’t think about it too much, boss man,” Tubbo tells him. “There’s plenty of rational theories for why it happened anyways.”

“Oh, please, el-a-bo-rate,” Tommy enunciates, and he turns just in time to see Tubbo’s face light up. “Oh, shit, wait. No, no no, no no no, hold on, I didn’t mean that—”

“Awww,” Tubbo whines. “Come on.”

“He’s going to mope,” Ranboo tells him. “This is his, like, third favorite thing to talk about.”

“Wait, what are your first and second?” Tommy asks, swirling around to glance at Tubbo again.

“My talking boxes,” Tubbo says, tapping his chin. “Second is probably explosives. Oh! Speaking of— do you want to stop by my warehouse today?”

“Warehouse?”

“Lab, technically, but it’s in a warehouse. Sort of. It’s just very large. I can show you things! We can blow something up!”

“We maybe shouldn’t do that,” Ranboo suggests. “Maybe?”

“You can press the detonate button,” Tubbo says, sly as he leans over and bumps his head against Ranboo’s shoulder. “C’monn, boss man. You know you want to!”

“...” Ranboo’s lips twist, but he doesn’t say no. Tommy laughs, delight bubbling up in his chest. “Fine.”

“Whooo!” Tubbo pumps his fist into the air and skips forward, laughing as they break through the crowds on the streets. Tommy takes a moment to look around properly— the other day when they’d taken a walk it had been dark, but now it’s slightly lighter due to the sunlight pouring in from the skylights above. He tips his head back, back, neck aching as he peers up at the ceiling that stretches eons above them and the rising, huge columns of stone that hold the agriculture on top of them. He can barely see the people on the elevators there, going up and down, the elaborate pulleys and mechanisms bringing people and crates from bottom to top and back again. The streets around them are similarly made of stone, dark corners catching most of the light. But the numerous street lamps light it all back up, Tommy curiously peering up at one as they walk underneath. Moths buzz around it and inside the glass, Tommy can see a small stone that’s clearly been enchanted for light. And now that he sees it— he can’t stop seeing it. Magic, everywhere, doing everything. Strength runes carved



into the walls of houses, protection, light runes used freaking everywhere. Painted onto the sides of carriages, sewn into clothing. Aimsey had been right up in the forest; while up there the magic had been raw and unfettered, here it is tamed. He can feel it still on his fingertips as they walk, and it's no small miracle.

Magic was interesting. He'd never really taken the time to study it all that much, leaving it to the experts around him. He knew the basics, but this... this was cool. He wanted to know more.

He'd ask Tubbo in a bit, maybe. Not here. Not now, as they pass by crowds of people dressed in various ways, most of it dark-colored and earthy. It feels like another dimension.

They're approaching the building Tubbo had called the Spire before, the central tower that reaches up but doesn't even come close to hitting the roof. It's made of bricks of stone, some of them painted a deep purple, and beneath it is a bustling square market that has hundreds of people. Tommy makes sure to stick close to Tubbo and Ranboo's side— he knows there are guards still following them, tailing from a distance, and it gives him some comfort. And yet, people don't turn and stare here.

It's as if he's a nobody. It's kind of nice.

It also allows them to get through the market faster. Tommy wants to stop and look, the stalls parading anything he could think of, but Tubbo doesn't stop and Tommy doesn't want to lose him. They pass by heaps of metal, a stall that sells just chairs, clothing, food, steaming pots of firehoney, a menagerie with all sorts of animals in cages. Colors shine and people barter, the harking calls of advertisement filling his ears. It's so much. It's fucking awesome. He wishes he had money. There's a moment where they have to stop and wait for a carriage to pass by, Tubbo's fingers digging into his arm as they wait, and Tommy catches a glimpse of something in the crowd. He cranes his neck to see it— it's a music shop, and there's a flash of red hair. Wait. Sally?

But then the girl turns, and it's not her. There are instruments regardless. Tommy has only a moment to think *Wilbur would like that guitar* before Tubbo is yanking him along again and the shining wood of the instrument disappears behind bodies and people.

"You're religious, yeah?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy catches up in order to hear him better. He nods. Tubbo points and he follows his finger, and over there— over there is a statue of Prime, her head bowed in prayer. The statue is layered with flower necklaces, and by her feet lay candles and offerings. Without a second thought he turns the tables. Now he's the one pulling Tubbo and Ranboo along as he marches over, pushing through the crowd with his head up high. He hasn't properly spoken to the Lady since... well, it's been a while. He kind of feels bad.

They come to a skidding stop in front of her. A few other Followers linger by her feet, and he catches sight of small locket portraits, dried flowers, food, candles, candy, everything and anything in between left to try and show appreciation. Or maybe to remember.

"The Ender Mother's across the square," Tubbo says as Tommy steps forward a bit, staring up at Her hooded face. "There's one at each corner. The Channel is to the east, Prime's in the

north, Ender in the south.”

“In the west?” Tommy asks, still staring up at her.

“Used to be the Blood God,” Tubbo says, his voice lowering just a tad. “Now it’s empty.”

“Mmm.” Tommy squints his eyes, still not looking away from Her. “I think Techno still follows.”

“The general? Yeah, no surprise there,” Tubbo scoffs. “You done, boss man?”

“Just a sec,” Tommy requests, and then he pats his pockets and steps forward. He doesn’t have much on him— he didn’t expect to come to a shrine today, but he whispers a prayer anyways and after a second, he tugs off one of the shiny rings on his fingers. He thinks it was a gift from Wil at some point, so he doesn’t feel a single bit guilty about leaving it at Her feet.

“Prime,” he says, quietly enough that they can’t hear him over the bustle of the market. “Creator of all that’s good, eternal matron. Keep my strength high and my spirits with it, and lay your blessings upon me and—” He stammers for a second, then glances down at the ring he’d just so gently laid upon the stone at Her feet. “—and those I am... with. Those who carry my burdens as I carry theirs. I ask for help in this time of need.”

His mind flickers to Dream, just for a second. He misses him.

“Lady,” he says a second later. “Not to be a bitch and ask for a lot of things, but *please* , let things work out. I am so fucking scared.”

She says nothing to him. Her lips don’t move, Her eyes stay shut. Tommy waits for a second and no longer, and then turns back to Ranboo and Tubbo. They’ve both kept back, away from the statue, but they move to greet him as he returns.

“All good?” Tubbo asks, and Tommy nods.

“All good,” he says. “Do you...?”

“Nah,” Tubbo says, waving a hand. “I prefer to put my trust in things I can see.” Tommy squints at him, and then at Ranboo, who just shrugs.

“What?” He asks. “Don’t look at me.”

“You’re fuckin’ insane,” Tommy tells Tubbo, but he doesn’t mean it. Plenty of people don’t believe in what he believes in, but that’s fine. Prime will help anyways if She wants to. Tubbo can explain it however he wants. “Why are we here again?”

“Stopping by the Spire,” Tubbo tells him. Ranboo hums. “Gotta ring a bell for the dead, and grab candles. And then whatever you want, ‘cause it’s your birthday!”

“Right.” Tommy squints up ahead of them, and yep, now he can see the crowd of mourners dressed in pale white ahead of them. “Cool.”

“How do you usually celebrate?” Tubbo asks, and Tommy just shrugs.

“We don’t,” he says. Tubbo gasps as though Tommy’s just sliced his grandma in half.

"You don't celebrate?" Tubbo asks.

The silence stretches between them, starting to become awkward and stressed. Eventually, Tommy says: "...no, I mean. A lot of people kind of... died."

"...right," Tubbo says, previous excitement now muted. "So. What *do* you do?"

"Went to church, mostly," Tommy says as they get closer and closer to the Spire. "Vigils. Um. I would hand out rations during the war. Stuff. Give a speech, at the end of the day, honoring the people we lost. That kind of stuff?"

"Did you have cake or something?" Tubbo asks. "Like, after that?"

"Nooo," Tommy says, drawing it out in confusion. "Why would I have cake?"

“Prime,” Tubbo says, turning to look at Ranboo. “Ender *Mother* . We have to get him a cake.”

“That is pretty sad,” Ranboo confirms. “Everybody should get cake on their birthday.”

“You are both nutters,” Tommy decides.

“Haha,” Ranboo says. “Nuts.”

“Pardon?” Tommy whips his head around to Ranboo slapping a hand over his mouth to hold back his laughter, Tubbo cackling happily. A few people ahead of them turn back and Tommy feels his cheeks burn, shutting his mouth as they come closer to the crowds at the base of the Spire.

Tubbo and Ranboo also go quieter. The tone around them goes from busy and energetic to more somber as people pass, small candles in their hands, and Tommy barely catches how Tubbo grabs a few from one of them and tucks them away in his bag. They press onwards, until they’re right at the base of the Spire.

There’s a stone wall there. Carved into it are... names.

Tommy hangs back.

It’s not his fault. It’s not his fault. He was a baby– any rumors are just that, rumors. The Cataclysm was not his fault, no matter what people say, and he desperately clings onto the thought as he stares at the wall of names in front of them.

“They go all the way around,” Ranboo tells him quietly, also having hung back as Tubbo makes his way forward and leaves a candle at the base of the wall, kneeling beside a few other mourners. Songs drift up above their heads– Akkesh, the language of the people below.

Tommy's the least fluent in it, but he knows it enough to decipher the lyrics. They sing of remembrance and quiet peace. Ahead of them, Tubbo lights his candle and bows his head.

Tommy looks away.

It's not his fault.

It hurts anyway, even after Tubbo returns to them with a smile on his face that doesn't reach his eyes. He smiles, but it's not real, and Tommy takes his arm in hand as they walk. They walk the perimeter of the entire Spire, the tall slabs of polished rock bearing thousands of names. Tommy knows it's not even all of them— it can't be. They wouldn't be able to fit them all if they tried. There had never been an official death count, but Tommy knew it had been in the millions.

After they find their way back to the original side they'd come in on, they go. The mood is still somber, but some people are laughing and still singing. It echoes, bouncing off the walls of the enormous cave and rebounding back to them where it lingers in their ears. Worse than ghosts.

"Come on," Tubbo says, and his hand slips down into Tommy's, all callus. "Let's go."



Tubbo's workshop is up a very steep hill. Tommy curses him out the whole way up, out of breath and stumbling as they push their way up the street. The Isles are notable for their flat, open stretches of land— Caterwaul had been a city without hills, and he finds himself staggering up along the slope as Tubbo skips ahead of him, laughing. He takes solace in the way Ranboo seems to struggle too, but the other isn't even out of breath when they get to the top like Tommy is. He scowls.

The workshop is very much a warehouse— a massive building that looms, connected to a few others around it and a big open, flat roof. Tubbo opens the door with a set of keys from his bag, and without too much hesitation they file inside.

"Holy shit," Tommy mutters under his breath, Tubbo shoving back a curtain of fluttering fabric, some patches of it burnt or singed. Beyond that is an open room; tables stretch out the length of it, benches and chairs kicked to the side. Lanterns light the room, huge hanging lamps from the ceiling encased in metal cages. The room glows golden, the occasional soulfire lantern adding sparkles of blue. It's a fucking *mess*, drawers half pulled out and the most random objects littering the place. Huge jars of gunpowder and redstone are against the farthest wall and Tommy gives those a wide berth as he explores, picking up and putting down twisted bits of metal. Random runestones are scattered everywhere, heat, protection,

weakness, slowness. Included in the mess are books and papers in every language Tommy can think of, even Ender and the language of Enchantment. He picks one up— a set of blueprints, maybe, and over the edge of the paper he can see Tubbo sit on a stool and grin at him.

“That’s for an aquifer,” he says, chipper as can be. The solemn tone from the Spire has faded a bit, and Ranboo sits in a corner with a black cat that appears out of *nowhere* . “Cool, right?”

“I have no idea what any of this means,” Tommy admits, putting the paper down again. “What the fuck do you do in here? Build ‘n shit?”

“Invent,” Tubbo corrects. “I invent. Come see my project, boss man.”

“Only if it’s cool,” Tommy says.

“Everything I make is cool,” Tubbo tells him, and swivels around on his stool to a workbench that is clearly the main one he works at. Tools hang on the wall above it, gloves to the side and various papers scattered. On the workbench are dismantled boxes, and Tommy’s mind flits to months ago and their first meeting— Tubbo shoving the box into his hand and making him hold it out on the balcony, rude to a fault and bringing Tommy down off the edge. The boxes have changed since then. There’s a grate over one end of it, redstone glittering all over the place and fingerprints on the outer shells.

“Talking boxes,” Tubbo says. His fingers move deftly over the metal, attaching small wires and twisting things together until he slips the metal backing on and turns. He tosses one to Ranboo, who dutifully holds it up and presses a button on the side.

“Hello,” Ranboo says into the grate. Tubbo’s box crackles to life, static rushing through the grate. Tommy winces.

“It’s a work in progress,” Tubbo admits, “but we’re nearly there, I swear it. It’s all about the frequency of— you know how light is waves, boss man? So is sound, I think. And if I can just catch the waves on the right length— transmit it through one box to another, I think maybe I can get the sound from over there—” He points to Ranboo. “—to over here.” He taps his own box. “I’m so close! Soooo close.”

“You can do it,” Tommy tells him. “I mean, if anyone can do it, it’s gotta be you, right?”

“Sure,” Tubbo says, setting down his box. Ranboo comes over, plopping his own on the desk with a smile.

“Build him a frog, Tubbo,” he says.

“What?” Tommy asks, whipping his gaze to him. “A frog?”

“Ribbit,” Ranboo tells him solemnly. Tommy screws his face up at him, mouth twisting.

“Sure!” Tubbo turns, and then there’s wire in his hands and he’s twisting it, shaping it into something recognizable as an actual frog, a frog that lives in swamps and ponds and puddles,

and then when he finishes and puts it down on the desk, it moves. Tubbo presses the back of it and winds it up and then— hop, hop, hop!

“Oh,” Tommy says, leaning down to stick his eyes up close to the wire creation. “He *llo* , little friend. Aren’t you so cute?”

“It’s metal,” Tubbo says wryly. “It can’t hear you.”

“He is precious,” Tommy says accusingly, “and since you’re his dad you’ve got to be nicer.”

“I’m not his dad!”

“Creator, then.” Tommy reaches out and scoops the little frog up in his palms. “He is my best friend now. I will call him... Funny Boy.”

“Funny Boy?” Ranboo asks, sounding mildly affronted yet wildly amused at the same time. “I mean— okay, don’t— don’t look at me like that, jeez—”

“Say you’re sorry,” Tommy demands, grinning wildly as he shoves his hands. “Funny Boy is actually demeaning, I’ve decided. His name is Charles. Apologize to Charles.”

“Sorry Charles,” Ranboo stammers, and Tubbo cackles, long and loud.

They hang around like that, Tommy entirely amused by Charles for a little while. It is a fascinating creature, hopping around the stone floors whenever Tommy winds him up. Tubbo tinkers on his boxes for a bit, murmuring back and forth with Ranboo occasionally and trading mild insults with Tommy otherwise.

After a bit, Tubbo turns around. He’d been messing with something for a bit and turning away whenever Tommy asked to look, and only now does he show him the outcome.

A metal cake. Tommy stares at it. Stares at Tubbo.

“I can’t eat this,” he points out. Tubbo grins, and turns it, showing him a button on the side.

Fireworks spit out, raining sparks down upon the ground and dancing around their feet. Tommy jumps back, shouting as Tubbo cackles wildly and Ranboo shouts, quickly stomping out what little sparks catch the edges of paper on the floor in order to keep them from igniting.

“You know,” Tommy says, his voice more high-pitched than he’ll ever admit to, “considering you have a shit ton of gunpowder across the room, you’d think you’d be more careful!”

“Careful? Have you *met* Tubbo?” Ranboo asks, sounding exasperated.

“Happy birthday!” Tubbo says gleefully. “The big one-five!”

“Wooo,” Tommy says, and the reminder of his birthday sits like a stone in his stomach, one that’s been placed in coals and kept there until it burns. “Yay.”

“You know, it’s okay to be excited about it,” Tubbo says, placing the tiny metal burning cake on his desk.

“Sure,” Tommy says. “I mean, I can be happy when all those people are sad. Absolutely. I’m great. Fifteen! One year closer to death.”

Silence falls over the room, and Ranboo inhales.

“Wow,” he says quietly. “Edgy much?”

“Thanks,” Tommy says. “Awesome. Thank you, Ran-boo, for the insight on that one.”

“What?” Ranboo says. “I’m just saying.”

“He’s right, Tommy,” Tubbo cuts in. “I mean. I get it.”

“You don’t,” Tommy snaps, the heat from that stone rising. “Fuck off.”

Tubbo catches onto the problem immediately. Tommy’s not sure how, and yet: “It wasn’t your fault.”

“May as well have been,” Tommy tells them both.

“No,” Tubbo says. “No, it wasn’t. Listen.”

“Fuck off.”

“Listen. The Cataclysm was— it’s a mystery. Mostly. It’s mostly a mystery, you know why? There was nothing preemptive to it, no warning. It’s like— we know how storms work, sure. We can see the clouds and temperature and know when a monsoon is coming. This was nothing like that. We have no idea how it happened or, more importantly, why. It just did! And people have been trying to figure it out for years now but no one’s cracked it!” He takes a breath. Tommy scowls. “It wasn’t even like a completely new type of magic came through or anything— it was an overhaul of the past system, like someone lifted up the bedsheet and ruffled it a bit. It’s not different, it’s just.... shifted, moved around a bit. Things are the same but also not, which means a lot of us had to start over from square one.

We’ve barely touched what magic can do. We barely know anything. Runes are so rudimentary. We learn new shit every day! The Cataclysm was natural, Tommy. It had to be. Some kind of... I don’t know, something to do with the ley lines on the Continent, maybe Libra. A blockage in the mountains. I read a book on it. But the thing is, Tommy, it’s not—” Tubbo sighs, long, licks his lips. “It can’t have been your fault. You were a baby, for one.”

“Renowned for their helplessness,” Ranboo cuts in, nodding sagely.

“And,” Tubbo says, “the evidence is suggesting otherwise anyways. You’re good, boss man. In the clear. Celebrate your birthday and don’t feel bad about it.”

“It’s not that easy,” Tommy says, tucking his arms around himself. “Besides, I’ve never celebrated before. I don’t even know what to do, and don’t tell me that’s sad, I *know* it’s sad,

shut the fuck up.”

“I spend time with people I love on my birthday,” Ranboo says. “Do we count for that? Are we there yet?”

“No,” Tommy tells him, sticking his nose into the air. It’s a blatant lie. “Not yet.”

“Oh, shut up,” Ranboo says fondly. Tommy bites his lip, stifles his grin— he does feel better in some strange way. Calmer. Maybe Tubbo is right— he sure sounded like he knew what he was talking about, the technical ideas of magic and how the world flows. He was convincing, and honestly, that’s all Tommy can ask for. Maybe it’s a lie. Maybe it’s not true. But who are they to know, or care? If it puts his mind at ease for now Tommy doesn’t give a shit. He’d do anything to make this awful, lonely, guilty conscience go away.

Maybe it’s not true. Maybe it is his fault. How was he to know?

“We should head down to the lake,” Tubbo says aimlessly. Or, not so aimlessly. “That was the part of the Underground that got destroyed, way back when. I was really little. My parents took me in after it flooded.”

“Flooded?” Tommy asks. Tubbo points across the room.

“Remember my aquifers?” He asks. “We get our water from underground sources. When the Cataclysm happened, the floors cracked and it rose way higher than normal. It flooded the lower section of the Underground and a lot of people didn’t get out in time. We fish there now, but you can still see the buildings under the surface.”

“That’s creepy as shit,” Tommy informs him. “What the hell?”

“It’s kind of cool looking,” Tubbo says, shrugging. “And now we have lots of fish. They breed liek *crazy* .”

“Ew,” Tommy says, scrunching his nose up. “We eat a lot of fish in the Isles.”

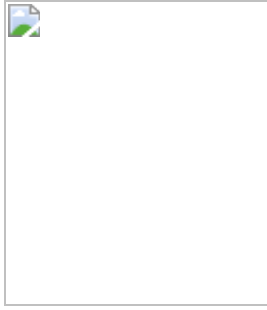
“I’ve heard!” Tubbo pushes up off his stool with a grin. Tommy grins back. Ranboo glances between them, and then raises a brow.

“We should go fishing,” Tommy says.

“Ew,” Ranboo echoes.

Tubbo laughs, smile so wide on his face, and Tommy feels... good. Not perfect, but good. “You read my mind!”





The lower lake is wide and dark and haunting.

Boats flicker out along the side of it, their trek across the city to get here leaving them all with legs like jelly and breathless. They end up by the docks first but it's crowded and loud, so Tubbo tugs Tommy along until they're farther away and in a more secluded area. Pathways line the water, railings and crates serving as barriers from the depths. Down here it is darker than the main city, lights on small boats far out across the lake. In some places, stone walls rise above the surface, breaking the monotony and causing small ripples. Remnants of buildings just like Tubbo had said.

Tommy can almost hear the horror, feel the earth shaking under his feet. They are a generation haunted, whispers of horrific events curling behind their ears and leaving them bent and broken. Ghosts that linger, people they will never know. Grief that can't be spoken, a pain that goes on and on, remembrance for things they cannot remember.

They forget fishing rods. Tubbo turns back to get them.

Ranboo and Tommy chat shit for a little bit— stuff about Tubbo's siblings, little unimportant things. Jokes, prodding and poking at one another and pushing boundaries until falling silent when it gets to be too much. Ranboo is easy to make laugh, especially with a well placed inappropriate joke.

Tommy's mind flicks to Dream's instructions. *Make friends.*

Tommy leans against the railing they're against, his cheek cold where the metal bites into it, and stares across the dark lake. They've both been awkwardly quiet the past few minutes. "Ranboo," he says eventually, and his friend hums. Time to take the plunge. Get a little more serious. Capitalize on the somber tone that's hovered between them the entire day. "Do people listen to you?"

"What?" Ranboo asks. He shifts, clothing rustling beside Tommy. "I mean- yeah, sometimes? I guess?"

"Not all the time?" Tommy prompts. Ranboo falls silent, then-

"Not all the time," he admits.

Tommy shifts. He pushes his face up off the railing and straightens his shoulders, still looking out at the lake. Inhale, exhale- it's now or never, really, he's never felt this *bold*. When he turns to look at Ranboo, the other teenager is staring at him with a strange sort of muted

expression of interest, maybe uncertainty. Tommy takes a step towards him. Ranboo takes a step... back.

"What would you do to get them to listen?" Tommy asks, staring him down. " *All* the time?"

"I... I don't know," Ranboo says, and now he's leaning back away from Tommy again, frowning. "Why? What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Tommy lies, and then a second later, "well, that's a lie. A lot. I'm doing a lot. To make them... listen."

Ranboo stays quiet. Tommy continues after a second, because there's nothing more brutal than pure and utter honesty.

"It feels like they stole my heart," he says quietly. "Ripped it right out of my chest and refused to give it back. And they're not cruel, but that's almost the cruelest thing they could do, innit? Sit there on their moral high ground and smile down at me, at *us* , and tell us that we're too naive to understand. Too stupid to say anything." He stares at Ranboo. "Too young to have a voice."

"Tommy..." Ranboo says, warning in his tone.

"I don't care what you think of me," Tommy says plainly. "I don't. But as a friend, a real friend, one of the only people who's listened to me in this stupid fucking— I want you to... to know. I don't want to hide things from you, Ranboo, you get it, right?"

"Hide things?"

"Stuff. Secrets. We're friends, right?" Just enough lonely desperation in his voice to evoke pity and there's the small weak spot, just between the shoulder and breastplate.

"Yeah," Ranboo says, voice cracking a bit. "We are."

Tommy peers up at him, lets some of his raw fear show through, and says: "I want to take it back."

And kill the Emperor. But starting with a lesser note is probably safest, right? Tommy watches as an array of emotions flickers over Ranboo's open face, his fingers gripping the metal railing so tightly his knuckles go pale. After a second, Ranboo looks away from him, out over the water.

"The Isles," he says, because Ranboo's not stupid. "You want them back."

"Of course I do," Tommy says. "They're my *home* ."

"How do you plan on doing that?" Ranboo asks.

"I have help," Tommy says smoothly. Ranboo's gaze snaps back to him, almost surprised. "What? I'm good at this shit, dude. Politics— it's like a dance, right? I need help. I can't do this alone. I need a partner."

“That’s not a plan, Tommy,” Ranboo says. “Telling me you have help and then telling me how it’s a dance.”

“Well, you’re kind of a key player here,” Tommy admits, tipping his head this way and that. “Considering the fact I can’t do it without you.”

“What?” Ranboo blinks. “Me?”

“Yeah, *you*,” Tommy says, reaching out to give his leg a kick. “You’re perfect. You’re raised like I was— into this role, ready to go. Ranboo, if you help me, by the end of this no one will ignore you. You, Tubbo, me. We could have a lot of stuff and people in our palms by the end of it.”

“End of *what* ?” Ranboo pushes, leaning forward now, but he’s not saying *no* and he’s not screaming for a guard, so. Tommy will take what he can get. “What’s your plan here, Tommy? Just taking back the Isles, or, like. What? Installing yourself as king again?”

“That and a few other things,” Tommy admits. “Mainly getting the Isles back.”

“There’s not enough of your army left to do that,” Ranboo says and it stings but he’s right. Tommy’s at least grateful to know Ranboo can speak up when he needs to, that tiny bit of backbone showing itself in the best places. “Not against the Empire.”

“We plan to hit close to home,” Tommy says, and Ranboo opens his mouth, and then shuts it. Opens it again.

“From... the inside,” he says. Tommy nods. “Why are you telling me this?”

“‘Cause I trust you,” Tommy says simply, truly, plainly. He does. Ranboo shuts his eyes. “And... as much as it pains me to say it, truly, I need you. They all think you’re a pushover,” Tommy forges onward. “But you’re not. The Ender Mother *chose* you herself. Prime herself guided their hands. Dude, you’re way stronger than you or I think- and believe me, I don’t think you’re strong. I think you’re a coward. But you love Libra, right?” He sets his shoulders, watches as something hardens in Ranboo’s eyes. Something angry. Something righteous. Good. “Just like I love the Isles? Like Tubbo loves blowing shit up? If you help me— help *us* — I can guarantee no one will ever ignore you again. No one will dismiss you. You’ll be backed by the strongest army this Continent has seen in a hundred years. I’ll be right there supporting you, and if he agrees, Tubbo will too. We’d be unstoppable. There’d be nothing to fear anymore. I need you.” Tommy grins, and it is sharp. They are scissors, rock, and paper; Tommy has cut through Ranboo’s defenses with ease. Scissors wins against paper. He watches as the older teen melts in on himself, and then straightens up.

“You need Libra,” Ranboo corrects, and Tommy shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “I need you. My friend.”

Ranboo swallows.

“Have you told Tubbo yet?” He asks. Tommy shakes his head.

"I was hoping for today," Tommy says quietly. "Tonight, maybe. Asking him for help. Asking both of you for help. But this morning got... stupid, and busy. Would reminding you it's my birthday affect your decision?"

"Definitely not," Ranboo says, but he's smiling and that's good, so Tommy takes it as a minor win. "I— you're right, I mean. I'm *tired* of not feeling seen. I just... need to think about it."

"Sure," Tommy says, stepping back, hands in the air. "Sure sure sure, as much time as you need, I guess. And I just—" He takes a breath. "I needed to tell someone, 'pose."

"Cool," Ranboo mutters. "Cool, cool cool cool. Okay. Awesome."

"Awesome," Tommy says faintly. "Right. Me committing treason is awesome."

"It kind of is," Ranboo says, ducking his head to the side and that makes Tommy laugh, loud and bright.

"I know, right?" He asks, throwing a hand out. "I'm fucking brilliant, is what I am. C'mon, Ranboo. Ranboob. Boober."

"Don't—"

Tommy goes in for the kill, tipping his chin down and fluttering his lashes up at Ranboo. Pout the lip. Perfect puppy dog eyes, pleading: "Please? Help me?"

They stand there, silence stretching between them. Ranboo opens his mouth, and—

Tubbo rounds the corner, and Ranboo immediately steps back from Tommy, eyes glistening with a hundred words unspoken. Tommy puts his hand down— Tubbo stops, skidding almost to a frozen spot and glancing between them both. He clearly notices the air between them, and after a second his eyes narrow. Suspicion. Lovely, Tommy thinks, and prays to Prime that Tubbo doesn't question it. Just lovely.

"What did I miss?" Tubbo asks. The fishing rods clatter to the ground.

"Nothing," Ranboo says, before Tommy can spit the word out himself. He shoots Tommy a look that says clearly: *we will be continuing this talk later*, before turning to Tubbo with a smile that barely seems forced at all. "Did you get crab traps too?"

"Nah," Tubbo says, "figured this would be enough. C'mon, Tommy! People are going to start sending out boats soon."

Tommy looks out across the dark water, the remnants of a dead city beneath the surface, and takes a fishing rod.

Tubbo is right. They're only casting for a few minutes before, in the distance, Tommy can hear voices. More and more until eventually, the sound echoes. And on the water are—

Tiny paper boats, each with a candle in the center. Hundreds, no, *thousands* of them are sent off from every shoreline possible, flickering like tiny stars come to earth. Tommy stares.

Tubbo puts his rod away and opens his bag, pulling out a tiny boat of his own. It takes him a few tries to light the candle, but he does.

And then he kneels by the water and places the boat in, giving it a nudge with his finger to send it off to join it's brothers and sisters.

Tommy watches.

"One candle for every person lost," Tubbo says quietly. Tommy, suddenly, thinks of his own mother. Does she get a candle out there? Should he be sending one off and thinking of her? He doesn't know— he wouldn't even know what to think about, that's how little he knows of her. The Cataclysm took so much from them, but Tommy can't even begin to comprehend it. Grief marring his chest, a raw open wound that he can't decipher from the rest of his emotions too well. It's always been there; always will be, he thinks. Grief that he can't put a name to, mourning for something they never even had a chance to enjoy. Tubbo stands next to him, Ranboo on his other side, and after a moment, their fingers twine together. They stand there, looking out upon a sea of lights, and Tommy wonders if they'll ever understand.

Later, on the walk back, Ranboo hangs back before they enter the front door of Tubbo's house. Tubbo is ahead of them— Tommy waits.

"If Tubbo says yes," Ranboo tells him, a thoughtful, quiet look on his face as he watches Tubbo skip up the stairs with a hum, "I'll help too." Tommy blinks, and then nods.

Okay. Okay!

It's as good a start as any.



## Chapter End Notes

ART FOR THIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#) AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

posting this from my mom's car, whoo!

if you aren't in my discord or follow my twitter you might not know but i will be changing my update schedule to **saturdays at 12est**. i have classes on fridays!

i will also **not be updating next week** as i will be out of town and also need a break!!  
haha.

so tell me: do you think tommy's birth caused the cataclysm? or did tubbo's little speech convince you otherwise :)

tommy is making friends!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ;D

-

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc IV. - boom boom boom boom

### Chapter Summary

tws: bugs

this chapter was beta'd by the incredibly showstopping definitelynotshouting/tj!!!!!! <3  
big love for the best editor

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For dinner that night, Tommy has cake.

He's not expecting anything— even after the fuss Tubbo raised when they'd discussed it. He hadn't been expecting the other boy to disappear for a few minutes as Teagan and Lani steal him into the drawing room, a girl on each arm and voices loud and boisterous. Truth be told, Tommy had barely known Tubbo was gone as he'd been kidnapped.

Apparently, it had been a coordinated attack, because when he enters the dining room for dinner that night at the bell, there's a cake sitting beside his plate with crisp white frosting and blue flowers decorating the outside. The Underscores beam when he sits down in front of it, and with a small (read: embarrassing) amount of fanfare, they sing a terrible song that's horribly out of tune. The royal family is there too— he catches how Ranboo looks at him when they arrive— and Wilbur doesn't sing, his mouth stubbornly shut. Neither do the General or Emperor, but the Empress is at least trying.

It's a *little* endearing, seeing her stumble on words she clearly doesn't know, watching as Crumb pounds the table with her tiny fists and shouts the words. Mostly stupid. Tubbo grins so wide it consumes his whole face, and Ranboo laughs when Tommy flushes and hides his face in his hands.

It's not a party. They don't even celebrate beyond that; a song and cake at dinner, a chorus of *Happy Birthdays!* at the end of the cacophony. He doesn't want them to celebrate, but the fact they care (although Tubbo definitely put them up to it) is... nice.

There is a strange kind of whiplash running through him as they eat and chat— across from him are the very people he'd just conspired with Ranboo about overthrowing, and yet it is so easy to slip back into bickering with Wilbur. It's so easy to ignore Philza's good natured comments, so natural how he scowls at Technoblade and smiles at Kristin. These are the people he swore to take down, and yet here he is, eating with them and laughing like nothing is wrong.



He catches Ranboo watching him out of the corner of his eye, curious. But they don't say anything more about it until the night has stretched long and they are heading up to bed.

"Ask him," Ranboo says as he passes Tommy on the stairs, and then it's just him and Tubbo on the landing.

"Ask me what?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy blinks. Suddenly, he's not ready.

He was ready with Ranboo. He knew his course of action, the plan of attack, how to shape his words just right to make the other boy pity him and use what little knowledge he had of his insecurities to get through to him. But Tubbo is— Tubbo is Tubbo, and Tommy loves him, and he only has the hope that Tubbo loves him back enough to help him.

Tommy glances over his shoulder. The hallway is empty of servants, empty of any kids, any adults. It's just Tubbo and him on the stairs, quiet. Tubbo, watching him with a mix of curiosity and concern, as though he's waiting for Tommy to say something terrible.

Tommy could say anything here. *Help me*, or maybe, *I trust you*.

In the end, he decides on: "Would you want to help me blow some shit up?"

Tubbo grins. "Yeah, duh," he says. "What are we blowing up? 'S long as it won't, like, get us into trouble. Well. Too much trouble. A little trouble, eh, maybe."

"By the end of it there won't be any trouble," Tommy quickly reassures him, and Tubbo raises a brow.

"Yeah?" he asks. Tommy nods. "So... what are we blowing up?"

"Um." Tommy glances around again. Triple checking. No one can hear this next bit, so he leans in close to Tubbo, lowers his voice, quietly hums. "Part of the Empire's capital."

Tubbo's face is unreadable. But this close, Tommy can catch the twitch of an eyebrow.

"Pretty sure that's treason, boss man," Tubbo tells him, lowering his voice to Tommy's level.

"Yeah, well," Tommy hums, "I'm getting the Isles back. So. I'm asking for help, and I trust you, because you're my best friend, and you're smart as hell Tubbo, and I need— I need help. I can't do it myself."

"Did you ask Ranboo?" Tubbo asks after a moment of silence.

Tommy's face screws up. "Bloody— what, yes, *of course* I asked Ranboo."

"We're a package deal," Tubbo tells him.

"That is literally what he said," Tommy bemoans, and Tubbo cracks a miniscule smile, but it vanishes a second later.

"Look," Tubbo says, and Tommy's heart sinks. "What you're asking of us is really, really dangerous, Tommy. If things go downhill—"

“Nothing will be tied back to you,” Tommy says, crossing a finger over his heart. “Promise.”

Tubbo stares at him. “My family?” he asks.

“Safe as life,” Tommy promises.

“They’re the most important thing,” Tubbo says. “My family. That includes Ranboo. What are the chances of us getting hurt?”

“Minimal,” Tommy says. Tubbo raises his eyebrow.

“Are you sure?” he asks. Tommy blinks, and then shakes his head.

“No,” he admits. “No, I’m not sure. But I can do my… best?”

“So,” Tubbo says after a moment, eyes a crushing weight on Tommy’s soul. “We’ll be doing a crime, then.”

“I mean—”

“There’s nothing like a good crime or two.” Tubbo is smiling now, and Tommy blinks.

“You are so fucking cryptic,” Tommy tells him brashly, and Tubbo just shrugs. His smile is beyond what Tommy would call mischievous— maybe devious now. Lingerin.

“Discussing treason out loud like this, you should probably be more cryptic than asking outright,” Tubbo points out. He gestures around them both, and Tommy feels the hairs on the back of his neck rising. “Anyone could be listening.”

“Yeah,” Ranboo chimes in, and Tommy jumps violently, tilting his head up to the next landing where the boy is standing, arms hanging over the railing and eyebrow cocked upwards. “Anyone.”

“Prime fucking—” Tommy spits out a few choice words at him, head tipped back and glaring . “Ranboo!”

“Did he say yes?” Ranboo asks, then shrugs. “Well, I was listening the whole time, so. Nevermind. Tubbo?”

“I’m down,” Tubbo says, and Tommy snaps his gaze to his other friend with mild surprise. “We can cover our tracks.”

Ranboo glances between them. “And if we can’t?”

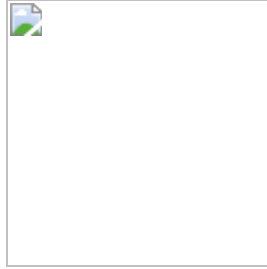
Tubbo considers something, then says cryptically: “Zenith?”

“Could work.” Ranboo gives them both a thumbs up.

“Consider us both committed,” Tubbo says, tipping his head back down to face Tommy with a smile. “For the moment.”

“Oh.” Tommy’s not entirely sure what’s going on. He’s not in control anymore, which is... fine, he trusts both Tubbo and Ranboo, and they say they’re helping him, but he doesn’t feel in control about it. Two supposed allies gained; Tommy regards them both with nervous eyes.

“Happy birthday, boss man,” Tubbo says, clapping him on the shoulder. Tommy flinches, but smiles.



They don’t have much time left in the Underground.

Their visit has dragged on already, and Tommy can sense the antsy tension coming from the Empire’s royal family. It’s not glaring, but it’s there, an undercurrent of the need and want to go home. Back where it’s safe. Back where Tommy is effectively a prisoner.

Here, at least, he can pretend he has freedom.

Tubbo wakes him early the next morning— Sunday, he thinks, but honestly they all blend together. The day after his birthday, Tubbo rouses him before the sun rises and spills through the great cavern, and makes him sit on the floor.

“This is dumb,” Tommy remarks, not for the first time. Beside him, Ranboo giggles.

“It’s tradition,” Tubbo says. He’s holding a lit candle, and in front of them all is a mirror. It’s the one attached to Tubbo’s wall, reaching upwards to the ceiling and only about as wide as Ranboo and Tommy shoulder-to-shoulder. Which is to say: not very wide. Behind them is another mirror, dragged over from the top of Tubbo’s desk/workshop. It’s smaller, but it reflects. They’re all holding candles, but only Tubbo’s is lit. “Magic, even.”

“Stop it,” Ranboo says as Tubbo wiggles his fingers in their direction. “It’s just superstition.”

“Lots of things are superstition,” Tubbo counters, leaning back and peering into the mirror before them. “I think this one is technically called scrying.”

“No one can see the future,” Tommy says.

Tubbo’s reflection just raises a brow at him, and holds up his candle. “You sure?” he asks. “Wanna go first?”

“This is stupid,” Tommy reiterates. He reaches out and lights his own candle using Tubbo’s, glaring at him as he does. “Do I just look in?”

“Hold it up,” Tubbo says, scooting backwards so Tommy has room to lean in. He holds the candle up and stares into the darkness of the mirror. The rest of the room is shadowed,

curtains pulled over the window, and the only light comes from his and Tubbo's flickering candles. He can barely see the outlines of Ranboo's face, gaunt and pale. Tubbo is kinder, the shadows casting long over his cheeks, and the walls of the room are cast in molten gold and inky black. It's a little haunting, and Tommy is certain they are the only ones awake, it's so early. The house is silent, and so are the streets. It feels like they're in a bubble, bouncing off one another as they whisper and giggle quietly. Tubbo had dragged them both out of bed barely ten minutes ago, the crusty remnants of sleep still clinging to Tommy's lashes as he looks at himself in the glass. When he'd tried to protest, Tubbo had raised a brow and asked if he really wanted to lose his allyship over a dumb candle.

Tommy did not. Tubbo was *probably* bluffing, but you never know. Also, it's Tubbo.

"What am I supposed to see?" he asks. Tubbo hums.

"Sometimes you see a person," he says. "Just... something. You have to look all the way back."

"Why the future?" Tommy asks. "I know what my future is going to be." A glittering crown, a title and kingdom that is rightfully his.

"It's just fun," Tubbo says. "Look!"

With a heaving sigh, Tommy does.

He's not sure what he's supposed to be doing, at first. Tubbo and Ranboo have shuffled out of the way now, leaving Tommy sitting between the two mirrors on his own. His candle is the only light; he can see the reflection of his own blond hair a thousand times over into the distance, the outlines of the mirrors like hallways in either direction. Tommy glances over his shoulder and watches as his reflection does as well, eyes glancing between them as they progressively get smaller and smaller. He blinks, and the candle flickers.

"The farthest square you can see," Tubbo instructs, and Tommy leans in, peering into the glass before him as he tries to make out anything in the dark, confusing spiral of reflection.

"I don't see anything," he says quietly.

"I'm scared," Ranboo tells them both.

"Don't be stupid," Tubbo chides, and Ranboo makes a quiet noise when Tubbo nudges him. But Tommy is too busy staring into the mirror to look over and hush them.

Because there is something in the darkness. A shape, a shadowy outline of a human figure, dark and— holding something, if Tommy squints. He stares at it, hardly daring to move as the figure holds up its hand and *beckons*. His stomach drops. His eyes widen, breath coming quicker and quicker, but he can't move as the figure holds out its hand and wavers in the light of the candle. If Tommy really squints and pretends he can see something else, they're smiling. He nearly drops his candle, the fear and confusion suffocating—

"Tommy?"

Tubbo's voice snaps him out of his trance. He blinks, whipping his head to the side; both boys are staring at him, and Tubbo tilts his head to the side. "You alright?" he asks. "What'd you see?"

Tommy debates telling them the truth. In the end, it was never a question of what he was going to say.

"Nothing," he says. Blunt, false. It must've been just his mind making things up, anyway. "I saw nothing. It's bullshit. Aren't you a scientist, Tubbo? Too old for fairy tales?"

"You didn't see anything?" Tubbo presses. Tommy scowls at him, then stubbornly blows his candle out with a *whoosh* of air, plunging all three of them into darkness.

"Nothing," he says into the still, silent room. Across from him, Tubbo inhales. Ranboo exhales in turn.

"You're a dramatic fuck," Tubbo says after a second, and Tommy snickers. Ranboo does too after a moment, sending all three of them into giggle-snorting fits that just make them laugh harder.

Tommy puts the mirror-image out of his mind, that dark, coaxing hand. That fear, curling in his stomach, the uncertainty like rotten sour milk. It was just a trick of the light, he's sure.

Later that day, after the rest of the house has woken up and eaten breakfast, Tommy is kidnapped.

Not seriously, of course. There's a tiny hand in his as Crumb leads him down the hallways of the Underscore home— it's a foggy day in the Underground, and everyone has elected to stay inside. So has most of the city; when Tommy looks outside, he barely sees any pedestrians and carts, and the streetlamps, blue as they are, light very little activity. They'd spent the morning doing a puzzle on the floor of the parlor with Aimsey and Teagan (Wilbur had been sitting in one of the fuzzy armchairs in the corner, reading a book. Tommy had traded ugly faces with him back and forth for the better part of an hour), and then Crumb had come in with Lani and demanded Tommy's attention for something important. So up he'd gotten off the floor and been pulled along by Crumb. Down the halls filled with rich carpets and tapestries, through a couple of rooms, and Crumb practically flies past a nanny who is walking Michael down the hall.

"Be careful!" she scolds as they move past, and Tommy tosses out an apology after her. They descend into the house, until finally Crumb stops at a doorway and throws it open. Then she stops again, letting go of Tommy's hand in order to open a trapdoor in the floor of— is this a linen closet?

"What is going on?" he asks suspiciously. Behind him, Lani giggles. "Am I about to die?"

"No," Crumb says, giggling as well. "Come on!"

Tommy looks at the dark hole in the floor, considers the two giggling girls in front and behind him, and follows Crumb down.

It's a basement— he's not sure what he was expecting, honestly, but a basement is fine. Normal. There are stacks of cheese and vegetables, various barrels here and there, and crates in the corners. A wine rack in the back. Tommy eyes that and keeps following Crumb, past the food and through a curtained-off area. This part is less filled with stuff, and also somewhat brighter. Tommy takes a minute to blink and adjust, and then— then he sees them.

Fucking bugs. All over the walls.

“What the—” he censors himself at the last minute, staring with wide eyes. Lani crashes into the backs of his knees.

“They're the firebugs,” Crumb tells him softly, one cupped hand coming up to show him a bug cradled in her fist, it's back end glowing slightly. “They live in the walls.”

“Then they come out a few nights every year,” Lani continues, gripping Tommy's shirt hem with a grin as she watches Crumb gently place the bug back onto the wall. “Crawl out of the caves and have babies.”

“Ewww,” Crumb giggles, and Tommy just... looks. The bugs don't move even as Lani lets go of Tommy and moves further into the room. It's almost like they're asleep, but as he watches, another bug comes out of a crack in the basement wall. Ugly fuckers, but in a... cute way. He can see the appeal as Crumb takes another and holds it in her hand, smiling and giggling in the glowing light. After a second she comes over, and offers it up.

“Oh,” Tommy says, reaching out to gently take the bug. “Oh, hel- lo .”

“Her name is Jessie,” Crumb tells him with a smile.

“How do you know?” Tommy asks.

Crumb just shrugs. “They're *all* named Jessie,” she says brightly, before turning and skipping back over to look at the rest of the bugs on the walls. Tommy glances down at the firebug in his hand and raises an eyebrow. It skitters over his palm, clearly enjoying the warmth of his skin as it curls near his thumb.

“Nice to meet you,” he says in a low whisper, then leans over and gently uncurls his hand so Jessie can make her way to the cool basement wall, little legs and wings unfurling slightly to get attached to the stone. He watches her disappear into the crowd, then slowly backs up.

Yeah, bugs are cool. But not a room full of them; that's a lot. He backs out of the firebug room and through the basement, up the short stairs and back into the hallway. Lani and Crumb giggle faintly as he goes, out of the linen closet and back onto the comfy carpet. He sighs, brushing his hand off on his pants.

“You alright?” someone asks, and he jumps. Down at the other end of the hall is Ranboo, shoulders hunched and eyes glinting with amusement.

“Fine,” Tommy says, gesturing. “Uh– they were showing me the bugs.”

“Oh, they’re out already?” Ranboo asks, coming over with a few long strides to peer into the basement. There’s a faint glow that Tommy hadn’t noticed before coming out of the trapdoor. “Fun! Full force tonight, then. I bet all the wet drew them out.”

“What are they?” Tommy asks, wrapping his arms around himself.

“Firebugs,” Ranboo says. “They’re like– they flicker. They’re like fireflies, but different.” Tommy’s seen fireflies before, pocketing the fields of the Isles and creating light in the dark. They’re gorgeous. Firebugs must be even more so. “We’ll probably go out and see them tonight. You down?”

“Oh– yeah.” Tommy nods, and Ranboo heads down into the basement, glancing up. “I’m down. What are you doing?”

“I’m going to wrangle Crumb and Lani,” Ranboo says, glancing back up. “Help me?”

“Absolutely the fuck not,” Tommy says. Ranboo sighs, glancing into the dark, then back up. Tommy just gives him a salute.

“You suck!” Ranboo tells him, but Tommy’s already backing away with a grin that nearly hurts his cheeks and the tiniest of evil cackles. No way is he helping Ranboo pull those two weirdos out of the bug room– instead, he takes a left, sneaking down the hall and away from the giggles and Ranboo’s stern voice. The hall stays the same, just different pictures, and Tommy starts heading back towards the parlor.

Before he gets there though– more laughter.

And listen. Tommy is a snoop at heart. He’s nosy. He’s a nosy boy, and he’s going to stick his face where it doesn’t belong. He hears laughter and he tips his head, eyes roaming until they fall on a half-open door a little farther down. His steps get light and he keeps quiet, walking slowly until he’s just outside the carved wood.

Someone laughs again. A woman, and Tommy knows who it is immediately. He risks tipping his head around the doorframe, and is greeted with a strange sight.

General Technoblade, smiling. And not just smiling– smiling *widely* .

“Enough,” the Empress is saying, leaning back on one of the couches with her feet up, and– in the Emperor’s lap, ew. She’s got a glass in her hand, and her face is flushed as she giggles.

“You’re drunk, Kris,” Technoblade says, voice layered with fondness. Philza throws his head back and laughs.

“Anna has a good stock of wine,” Kristin says, holding her glass high. Across the room on the opposite couch are Anna and Bo, laughing as well. “And you are very funny.”

“Some people might disagree,” Techno says, and Tommy is one of them, so yes. People disagree. The General is not funny; Tommy would know. As the General turns, their eyes

catch, and Tommy pulls back, hiding behind the door frame.

Silence, for a second.

“Pup,” Techno says. “I saw you.”

“Oh, is Tommy out there?” Rustling, and when Tommy tips his head to peer back into the room, the Empress has turned to face him with a mischievous, teasing grin. “There he is. Come on out, dear. We won’t bite. Except Techno.” She whispers the last sentence, and Tommy can’t help but crack a grin, glancing over her head to where Technoblade is rolling his eyes. He steps into the doorway fully, and Kristin beams.

“How have you been?” Anna asks from the other couch, and when he looks at her, her face is kind and open. Dark hair pulled up into a low bun, fist pressed to her cheek. “You three have been awfully flighty. Having fun?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tommy nods, locking his hands behind his back and twining his fingers. Tubbo’s mother is nice. Very nice. He wants to make a good impression.

“Come in, Tommy,” Kristin says, gesturing with her free hand. Behind her, Philza smiles, and strangely, so does Technoblade. “The rainy day has kept us all in, huh?”

“It’s... not raining?” Tommy asks, stepping forward into the room.

“The fog makes it humid enough to count,” Bo cuts in. Anna laughs. “Step outside and bam! You’re soaked!”

“Rainy day,” Kristin says, tipping her glass and beckoning Tommy closer. He likes Kristin, so he obliges, going up to the back of the couch and letting her fuss over his shirt, smoothing it down with one clumsy hand. Prime, they really had gotten into the wine. He notes the glasses about, and Anna’s red cheeks as well. “You look healthy. Good. Tubbo and Ranboo are such good influences.”

“If only Wil had taken a shine to them,” Philza sighs, and Kristin nudges him with her foot, huffing.

“Don’t you start,” she says. “Anna, your son is a saint.”

“Oh, hush,” Anna says, snickering. “He’s a menace.”

“Tubbo is *amazing*,” Tommy counters. All eyes turn to him— he blanches, gnaws on his lip. “You know. Uh. He’s nice.”

“I’m so happy you two are getting along,” Anna says with a large smile, and Tommy smiles back hesitantly. Oh, if only she knew. Speaking of, he glances down at Kristin once more, who’s moved on from patting his shirt down to his collar. Her fingers brush his hair, and she hums.

“So long,” she says, twirling it around her finger. Tommy allows the preening— he allows it, okay? It’s just nice. It’s nice to feel wanted, to feel like she cares. He wonders if Anna does



the same to Tubbo, doting and caring and sweet. Technoblade is quiet, and Philza just smiles as he watches. "Like straw. You'll have horses nibbling on it soon." Kristin laughs, and Tommy hides his snicker. Almost fond, Philza tips his head. A hand raises in the corner of Tommy's sight but he forces himself not to flinch, waits it out— and all that happens is a hand in his hair. He grimaces as it ruffles, messing with the strands.

"You almost look like me, with how long your hair is now," Philza says amicably. Tommy blanches. Bile, in the back of his throat.

"Oh," he says, reaching up to twirl a strand between his fingers absently. "I— mhm." There are no words to express his utter hatred for that statement. No words.

Actions will have to do instead.

That night, he takes scissors to it, the way one might shear a sheep's wool. The other boys are off doing... something, and he stares into the warped metal-mirror in Tubbo's room, holding the scissors up.

His hair is long now, long enough to braid, long enough to pull into a low ponytail and even a high one, with a few spare strands fluttering down around his cheeks. Philza had been right, earlier— when Tommy pulls his hair up and away from his face, he almost looks like the Emperor. They share similar coloring, blond and pale; Tommy's got freckles where the emperor does not, and a butt chin.

He stares at himself in the mirror, and *hates* what he sees.

So he holds out a long chunk of hair away from his face. He judges the distance, only a few inches from his scalp, and cuts.

It all falls away, littering the floor and shining honey-gold in the lantern-light. He gets all around his head before he finally stops, staring at his reflection once more.

It's choppy, bits and pieces hanging loosely everywhere. Without the extra weight of the hair below it, his curls come back in full force, loose waves sticking out in every direction. He looks like a mess. He at least looks less like Philza. Tommy tips his head back and forth, trying to get a better view of the back of his head as he starts to fix what he can; it's not perfect, and everyone will likely know he did it himself. He'll have to get it fixed by someone else at some point, but it's a *statement*, and that's all he cares about.

Busy at the mirror, he hardly notices when footsteps echo outside his door. A moment later, it creaks open.

"Tommy," Tubbo starts, voice booming. "Ranboo told me you'd come out and see the firebugs tonight after what Crumb showed yo— oh."

"Hello," Tommy grunts, trying to pretend like his cheeks aren't burning from shame. He should've locked himself in. Shit. "Busy."

“I can see.” The door gently swings shut, and Tubbo leans on it, hands pinned behind his back. “Impromptu haircut time?”

“Don’t make fun of me,” Tommy demands, and Tubbo laughs.

“I’m not!” he reassures, holding up a placating hand. “I’m not! You– I’m sorry, really, I’m not making fun, boss man. Swear it. You just look–”

“Stupid,” Tommy finishes miserably. Tubbo giggles, high and maybe a little nervous.

“Yeah,” he says. “A bit.”

“Oi.” Misery is this: turning to face Tubbo, a swoop low in his gut like a gull over water, and seeing his best friend hiding his face behind his hand to stifle a smile. “Fuck off, you lump. If you’re going to make fun, you could at least come and *help me* while you do it.”

“Well, I’ve never cut hair,” Tubbo says, but he makes his way behind Tommy. They both face the mirror, Tommy watching Tubbo’s reflection as he surveys the damage. “Neither have you, damn.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Tommy says sweetly. He hands the scissors to Tubbo. “You can see the back of my head. I can’t.”

“Believe me, I can tell,” Tubbo says, humming lightly and starting to snip away. “How short?”

“Short,” Tommy says, and Tubbo nods. He stares into the mirror, watching Tubbo’s face as he moves the scissors around and sticks his tongue out slightly. He’s focused, so Tommy stays quiet. Maybe giving Tubbo a sharp instrument and telling him to go nuts was a bad idea, but. He’s in it now. His eyes find his own face, studying the lines and creases that make him look a little bit older. The haircut helps– the roundness of his face has yet to leave, but he’s fifteen now, and there’s less baby fat in his cheeks and chin, jaw the sharpest it has ever been.

“I wish I had a razor,” Tubbo says, and Tommy blinks.

“Why?” he asks.

“To clean up the edges. You shave, right? Did you bring yours?”

Uh. Tommy does not shave. Should he be shaving? He tips his head to the side and squints at his chin, trying to see if there’s any blond stubble growing in. It doesn’t… seem like there is.

“Boss man?” Tubbo asks, and Tommy tips his head back upright.

“Nah,” he says. “I don’t.”

“Oh well,” Tubbo shrugs, and another lock of blond fuzz falls onto Tommy’s shoulder. “We’ll manage.”

“Don’t make me look ugly,” Tommy requests. “This face, Tubbo. It gets so many girls. The hair is part of it, you can’t ruin it and make me lose all my girls. Of which there are many.”

“Right, right, right,” Tubbo nods. “All of your plentiful women.”

“I feel like you’re mocking me,” Tommy says, and Tubbo gasps, loud and dramatic.

“Noooo,” he says. “Me? Mocking you? And your many, sexy women?”

“I never said they were sexy, Tubbo— I mean, they are, but let’s not objectify anyone here, come on, come on—”

“Right, right, right, sorry!”

“— you’re being so disrespectful, what the fuck.”

“I said sorry,” Tubbo says with a laugh, and Tommy grins into the mirror, holding back his own explosive laughter. Tubbo glances up and meets his eyes, and then they’re both laughing, Tommy unable to hold it back as his whole chest wheezes. Tubbo holds the scissors back until their giggles have subsided, and only then does he keep snipping and shaping. Tommy stays quiet, smiling faintly until finally, Tubbo puts down the scissors.

“Well?” he asks. “I think it’s the best I can do.”

Tommy tilts his head back and forth. It definitely looks better than when he had finished with it, shorn short in the back and fuzzy in the front, but not too long. It could be neater, but for a makeshift job it’s pretty good.

“It looks awesome,” he says after a second of studying it, and grins. “Thanks, Tubso.”

“No prob, big guy.” Tubbo pats his shoulder. “If anyone gives you shit, feel free to blame me.”

“Oh, I will,” Tommy promises him with a smile. “... Thanks.”

“It’s no problem,” Tubbo says again. They look at each other in the mirror, the same one they’d scryed in only that morning, and Tubbo’s smile gently fades. Tommy’s does too.

“I’m asking a lot of you,” Tommy says quietly. Tubbo just shrugs. “You can... you can always say no.”

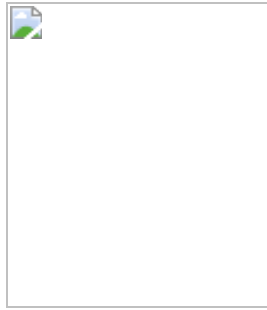
“I said yes,” Tubbo says. He shrugs again. “I’ll keep saying yes. I’ve read the treaty. It’s not fair.”

“They just don’t listen,” Tommy says, looking down and away from the mirror, picking absently at the cuticles on his left hand. “No one listens.”

“I will,” Tubbo says, and Tommy glances back up to look at him. They lock eyes, blue on brown, and Tommy purses his lips. His shoulders are starting to itch with the cut hair dusting them. He’s gonna need to take a bath.

“Thank you,” Tommy says. Tubbo just smiles, and then brushes at his shoulder absently.

“Come on,” he says. “The firebugs are out. Let’s go.”



Tommy leaves two days later.

The carriages and trunks are packed. Tubbo gifts him so many things– trinkets from his workshop, gifts bought from the markets. Ranboo gives him another outfit, this time in brilliant purple and green. Sort of garish. Tommy packs it next to the other one, and can only smile at how they clash. They watch from up in Tubbo’s room as the servants pile trunks onto the carts, Michael on Tubbo’s hip as they stare down. Tommy is quiet. They all are.

This glorious, glorious time is finally coming to an end.

“Ready,” Wilbur calls up to them from the floor below. Then again: “Tommy! Ready!”

“Coming!”

By the time they get to the front steps, everyone else is already ready. Anna and Bo watch with the rest of the Underscore family as Wilbur says his goodbyes and heads into the carriage– the Emperor is waiting on a horse and so is Technoblade, his eyes patient but steady as he watches Tommy head down the front steps and join the Underscores on the side of the street.

Oh, he wants to stay with them.

But he can’t, so he turns to Ranboo first, wrapping his arms around the older boy’s middle in a tight embrace, not unlike the one they’d first shared. They stand there for a moment, and then Tommy lets him go and turns to Tubbo.

“Write us letters,” Tubbo demands. “When you get there. Whenever you can. Let us know you’re safe.”

“Jeez, who are you, my mother?” Tommy asks, rubbing the back of his neck. “I will.”

“Promise,” Tubbo says. Tommy gnaws on his bottom lip and nods.

“I promise,” he says. “Write me back though.”

“We will.” Tubbo smiles, tipping his head a bit.

“We’ll come visit as soon as we can,” Ranboo says. “The Emperor wouldn’t say no to us.”

“Please,” Tommy says, then leans in and wraps Tubbo up in a hug. He can feel his eyes burning— there are tears gathering there.

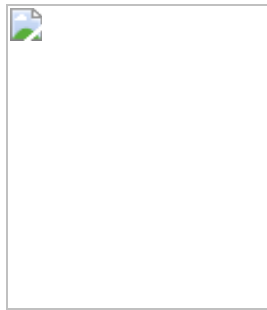
“This isn’t a goodbye,” Tubbo whispers in his ear, harsh and quiet and just for them. “We’ll see you.”

Tommy just squeezes him harder, like maybe he can express every emotion he’s feeling right now by pushing it into Tubbo by force. When he finally pulls back after a few long, agonizing moments, Tubbo’s eyes are dark. He smiles at Tommy, and Tommy smiles back. Ranboo reaches out to squeeze his hand, and they stand there for a minute.

“Tommy,” Technoblade calls. His voice gives no room for argument, so Tommy peels himself away and down to the carriage. Wilbur is watching him, hair over his eyes, and he leans back into his seat as Tommy clambers in.

The space between them is silent. For once, Tommy is grateful to Wilbur as the carriage pulls away and lurches forwards, towards the elevators that will lift them out of the Underground. He’s grateful, because the other boy says nothing when he buries his head into his hands and bites back the rest of his tears.

Wilbur just looks away, out the window.



They travel. Slowly, but surely, they make their way back into Empire territory.

The farther north they go, the colder it gets. Snow is piled on the ground as they ride— Tommy has a horse, a fine honey-colored steed named Churro who is just as sweet as her namesake— and at some point, he'd had to change back into his cloak and mittens. It's both comforting and upsetting to wear these blue pieces once more, but Tommy's at least grateful for their warmth. And his mind is settled by the fact that he has allies now, true ones, who will help him in his quest to take down the Empire, no matter what. He misses them, yes (oh he sorely misses them; every day they get farther from Tubbo and Ranboo Tommy can feel his heart falling to pieces. But he says nothing). He rides, complacent and quiet, taking in the countryside as they go. At some point, Wilbur rides up next to him on a horse of his own, the quiet clapping of their hooves and noise of the caravan stretching like a chasm between them. Tommy keeps sideyeing the prince, gripping his reins casually.

Eventually, Wilbur speaks up. He hasn't looked at Tommy once. “I feel as though I owe you an apology,” he says, still staring off into the distant mountain peaks.

“Yeah?” Tommy asks.

“I don’t think we’ve gotten along well,” Wilbur says, the understatement of the century, and Tommy snorts. “But I’d like to rectify that. I feel as though we should... get along.”

“Getting along isn’t something that just happens,” Tommy points out. “Especially not when one party is an enormous dickhead.”

“Right.” Wilbur’s face contorts, as though he’s just bitten a very sour lemon. Tommy beams.

“But,” he says, “I think you’re right. And even though I *know* Technoblade put you up to this—” Wilbur starts to stammer, but Tommy presses on, “— you still did it, so.” Tommy hums. “I guess that’s alright.”

“What’s alright?” Wilbur asks, and Tommy shrugs.

“Your apology,” he says. He’s still not quite sure what to make of Wilbur, but when he turns to look at him head on, the other boy’s brows are drawn together, hair lying low over his eyes as he looks at Tommy with a strange expression. “You can say you’re sorry, now.”

“I’m sorry?” Wilbur says— more like asks, but Tommy will take it.

“I am too,” Tommy says. “But not a lot, because I think I am justified for most things.”

“Biting me was unwarranted.”

“You were trying to grab me, you asshole—”

“ *Still* unwarranted!”

“The jury’s out. They’re so out. So far out, in fact, they don’t even exist anymore. This jury is gone.”

“Wha— that doesn’t make any sense. What is wrong with you?” Wilbur asks, laughing incredulously halfway through his sentence.

“Now we’re getting along, aren’t we?” Tommy asks, raising a brow.

Wilbur hums lightly, then nods. “Sure,” he says. “Getting along.”

Tommy decides now is a good time for sharing. He lets go of Churro’s reins and tucks his arms up under his cloak, removing one mitten in order to rifle around. Wilbur watches him curiously as he rummages and carefully extracts the folded paper from the large, flat pockets of his jacket, and slips them out from under his cloak. Carefully, he leans out just far enough to hold the papers for Wilbur to take.

Wilbur does, fingers bare and eyes questioning as he looks over the parchment and takes it in.

Back in the markets of the Underground, he’d stopped at the music stall he’d seen, only once. Everything was far too expensive for him to buy at the moment, but he’d borrowed some

coins from Tubbo on a loan with minimal interest and bought what he could. He hadn't been thinking about it at the moment— he'd just seen the parchment and thought of Wilbur, thought of the shiny rock he'd given Tommy and the day out they'd spent together, the gifts, and bought it. It's specialty paper, archival quality ink. Lines decorate it in groups of five, ready for composing. Tommy had seen Wilbur with his hobby spread out in front of him many times in the drawing room in Raven's Flight, and this stack of papers is thick and rich, blank and ready for someone to press a pen to.

"Manuscript paper?" Wilbur asks, flipping through it with his thumb. "I— thank you, Tommy." If Tommy didn't know any better, Wilbur sounds touched.

"It's no big deal," he sniffs. "So don't make it one."

"I wasn't about to," Wilbur says, shifting to tuck the paper away before the gentle wind can rip it from his hands. Tommy watches, something like satisfaction warm on his face. "But thank you."

"Welcome," Tommy grunts. He stares out across the horizon. It hits him then— a rush of emotion so strong it might be a forest fire, licking at his feet and chasing him across the plains. He wants Dream. He wants a home, not just this fearful in between. Making friends and allies and deceiving is fun, like a game, but as they approach the border to the Empire, Tommy realizes it's not a game. It's very, very fucking serious, and the thought terrifies him.

"You alright?" Wilbur asks, his gift is now tucked away. Tommy turns to look at him.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asks. Wilbur just raises a brow, and Tommy shrugs. "I'm fine. Just tired. It's been a long few weeks, innit?"

"Just a bit." Wilbur hums. "Well. I'm going to... go."

"Alright." Tommy grips Churro's reins.

"You might want to ride in the carriage for a bit," Wilbur tells him, glancing up to the sky. "Clouds are coming in. It might snow."

"Alright," Tommy says again, nodding a bit. He might ride in the snow if they let him, just to feel the chill and watch the flakes fall. Snow is still a novelty even now, the slushy piles on the side of the road, the way it clings to his cloak and eyelashes. He's watched it plenty of times from his window, but being out in it is different.

Wilbur is watching him now, pulling his horse ahead and heading up front. "See you," he offers, and Tommy just nods. He tilts his head to the ever gray sky, and waits.

An hour later, it begins to snow.

ART FORTHIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#)AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

we finally head back home.... back to the Empire, back to isolation. wonder how things will go from here? >:)

let's just say we've had our benchtrio arc. time for sbi !

and dream, he's here too ig :)

-

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)



## arc V. - a finality of sorts

### Chapter Summary

tws: n/a!

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Raven's Flight is just as they left it— a bustling city, filled to the brim with people and activity. Tommy stares as they approach from the carriage window, and he is transported back in time to nearly six months ago, maybe more, when he'd first seen the city. Back then it had been an omen of doom.

Now, he is slightly comforted.

Raven's Flight is familiar, in a way. Not in the way Caterwaul is familiar, or the way Dream is familiar, but Tommy knows the rules here. He knows how to sneak around and he knows who to trust. The only prying eyes belong to the royal family and the guards around the palace, and considering the General and Emperor's eyes have begun to soften on him as of late he's enthusiastic about his chances; not of escape, mind you, but of connection.

Dream is still in Raven's Flight. Tommy knows this— Purpled hadn't been able to ferry letters back and forth while they were in the Underground, but he'd received one on the road back to the Empire's capital and read it a hundred times over. Dream, safe. Dream, planning. Apparently the names he'd given him through Schlatt, the merch, were good. According to Dream, there are a good number of people on his side now. Not an army. Never enough for a full-blown attack, but enough to sneak their way in through the cracks and blow the place to smithereens.

Maybe not smithereens, Tommy amends, staring out at the glistening marble roof of the palace. It's quite pretty. Maybe he'll let it stay standing.

They're greeted by a welcoming party befitting of a king— in the crowd, Tommy finds their Lord Sophie, their eyes piercing as they watch the caravan crawl in. Philza is smiling broadly as they enter, the weather picture perfect with the sun shining down on all their heads. Wilbur and Kristin are smiling beside him and Tommy lingers behind with the General, watching as people come to praise and welcome everyone home.

"I never liked the pomp and circumstance," General Technoblade mutters about fifteen minutes into it all. There's still music playing from somewhere. "Seems excessive."

"Same," Tommy mutters right back, and they share an amused, exasperated look. The tiniest of smiles cracks open over his face, because there is no genuine connection to be gained than

the connection that comes through mutual suffering. Tommy turns away, shoving the smile down as best he can and staring out across the sea of people who have come to greet them all. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Techno drawls, which for some stupid reason makes him want to laugh harder— nervous giggles, rising in his belly and escaping like bubbles through his lips. Techno snorts. “Channel, kid. Relax.”

“I’m fine,” Tommy reassures him, but he’s still giggling nervously and scanning the crowd for an exit strategy as his fingers start to shake. “I’m fine. I’m—”

“My lord.” An exit. A bored voice, blond hair, a plain face that stares Tommy dead in the eye from beside him and scares the ever-loving shit out of him, holy fuck—

“Alexei,” Tommy says, and Technoblade is staring over his shoulder, likely, but Purpled hardly seems phased. “You’re here.”

“How was the Underground?” Purpled asks, Tommy catches the lilt in his voice. He’ll have to explain further but for now he just smiles.

“Eventful,” he says. “I miss my friends already.”

“I’m sure.” Purpled’s eyes flick to just over his shoulder and when Tommy turns, he finds the General looming, just like he thought.

“Technoblade,” Tommy says. “I think I’d like to get away from all this.”

“You and me both,” Techno says, and then he sighs, long and heavy. “I’ll cover for you if Philza asks. Go.”

“Thank you,” Tommy says, and he finds he means it. Weird. Whatever. Techno nods and Purpled turns, Tommy quick to tail him through the crowd and avoiding any big clumps of people— the noise has grown to a level that grates on his ears, echoing around the room and simply miserable to be a part of after so long in the quiet carriage on the way here. He’s exhausted. He smells like horses and wind and snow, and he wants a bath. He wants to check in with Dream especially, if he can find time to get out of the royal family’s hair long enough to sneak away. He’s so eager to get a proper plan in the works, and after they duck into the passageway outside the Great Hall, Tommy is grinning a bit.

“So?” he asks, and Purpled sighs.

“Schlatt was helpful,” he says, because of course he knows what Tommy wants, Prime he’s Tommy’s favorite. “The names were good.”

“We have help?” Tommy asks, keeping his voice low and hushed. Purpled nods once, curt.

“We do,” he affirms. “Now shut up. You stink.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Tommy shoots back instinctively, but he’s too thrilled to even care.

They have help. Now all they need is a *plan* .



“Philza’s days are busy,” Purpled says from behind the curtain as Tommy smooths bubbles into his hair, warm water making him lethargic and content. “Especially since he’s got a lot to catch up on since he’s been back. Karl is still in the library. We’ve decided on a meeting place.”

“Mhm?” Tommy prompts, still a little focused on the way the soap makes his hands all pruny.

“There’s a room off the kitchens,” Purpled says. “It’s close enough to sneak in without issue, and large enough to host us. Multiple exits for if we need to disperse quickly. As long as we stay quiet and keep a guard posted, we should be fine. Not to mention, more than a few guardsmen have been persuaded to look the other way.”

“How?” Tommy questions, thinking of the Empire’s loyal soldiers. Nationalism is big here—Tommy of course, can relate, but still. They’re loyal in opposition. That’s not great. “Aren’t the guards supposed to be honorable? There are protocols for this sort of thing. Also, I think half of them are scared shitless of the general.”

“People can be convinced,” Purpled says cryptically, and honestly, Tommy’s not going to question it. He sighs, leaning back against the wall of his tub and staring up at the ceiling.

“If you say so,” Tommy mutters. “You know, I hardly think I should be trusting *you* .”

“That’s fair,” Purpled says. “I’d rat you out if someone offered me more.”

“Wow. Woooow.”

“No one has yet, though. So you’re good. You should see the agreement Dream drafted with Punz.”

“Oh believe me,” Tommy says, shifting in the water and sitting up as splashing sounds echo around the room. He thinks of the dwindling treasury of the Isles. “I intend to. I want to schedule a meeting with everyone.”

“Half,” Purpled says. “There’s too many of us involved to meet without increased room for error.” He sounds bored, but Tommy catches how he gives answers quickly, with thought. Purpled is invested. He wonders if it’s just for fun, or if there’s something more. Whatever it is, he’ll figure it out.

“Half, then,” he says. “Three days from now, at midnight.”

“Sounds good to me,” Purpled hums, and Tommy can practically visualize him leaning against the wall and studying his nails with the bored air of someone who is utterly above everything happening around them. “I’ll let Karl know.”

“And he’ll tell Dream?” Tommy asks.

“Yup,” Purpled says, popping the p. Tommy smiles, and then sinks low into the water until his mouth is submerged. He blows a bubble, then more, watching them pop the moment they hit the surface. It’s childish, but it’s fun. (Even if he gets soap in his mouth.) “Are you done? I want to go eat.”

Tommy pushes himself above the surface once more and wipes at his mouth with an arm. The water is lukewarm, at this point, so: “Yeah,” he says. “I’m almost done.”

“Cool,” Purpled says, and that’s that.

The boy was right. Philza is busy. But by proxy, that means Tommy is busy. Dinner is held at a long table with many important nobles and head advisors that Tommy can’t be bothered to remember the name of. He ends up seated at Wilbur’s side, which is both a blessing and a curse because he has to listen to the older boy drivel. There is no better word for it: Wilbur drivels on about the most boring of subjects, like how farming could be done to be better suited for the cold weather. He talks about tithes, and the inconsistencies of the church, and he talks about how the advisor’s nose hair has a booger in it and every time he turns his head, it wobbles with the movement.

...okay, well. The last one is a bit funny, Tommy has to admit. The very sight of that booger has him nearly losing his composure, pained tears borne from laughter gathering in the corners of his eyes as Wilbur makes his voice go all high-pitched and stupid as he narrates the life of a booger hanging on desperately to the nose hairs of an old, stinky man. Tommy finds it stupid and funny and he laughs, okay, he laughs once. He laughs enough for the Empress to lean over and smile at them both with a look in her eyes that Tommy interprets quickly as *shut the hell up*. They oblige, but Wilbur keeps elbowing him under the table and kicking him with one foot. It’s annoying. Tommy endures the torture until the end of the night though without snapping at him once, though, so he thinks he wins this particular battle.

Three days is a long time, he considers, lying down in his bedroom and staring at the curtains of his bed. They’re still yellow— he’d much rather light blue, he thinks, and wonders if Kristin would let him change it. Three days with nothing to do but be good and make the royal family think he’s done causing trouble. It’ll be boring, but he can manage.

Of course, as there is with all things, the first day comes with a surprise.

Literally.

"There's a surprise for you in your room," Wilbur says nonchalantly. Tommy stiffens, and then whips his head around to stare at him accusingly. They're sitting in the breakfast room, not eating anymore but just loitering— Tommy had only just left his bedroom an hour or so ago, and everything had been fine then. A twinge of annoyance flashes through him.

"What did you do?" He asks. If anything in his room, if any of his things have been touched, he's going to be pissed.

"Guess you'll have to go and find out," Wilbur tells him, and Tommy stares at him for a moment longer, then scrambles out of his chair and shoves the door open. The long stretch of hallway leading to his room seems to span a hundred leagues instead of the few feet he should have to run, and behind him he can hear Wilbur laughing. Not cruelly, just— laughing. He skids to a stop in front of his door and fumbles with the handle, glaring at the carved wood and gemstones set into the metal knob before it finally swings open. He takes a step inside and everything is wrong but it's also right, nothing has been moved or taken away and his sheets are crisp and fresh, a fire burning in the heart—

—and there's a piano in the corner.

Tommy stops and stares, lingering just beyond the doorway as it sinks in. There's a piano in his room, and it's beautiful. The window casts light on it, honey-colored wood carved on one side with scenes from a forest hunt. On the underside of the lid is another carving, this one of a seaside village. Tommy stares, taking in the smooth glistening boards and the off-white of the keys. He quietly steps up to it, the bench tucked neatly under the keyboard and padded with soft blue fabric. He runs his hand over the keys and they're so smooth, so perfect. It's even more beautiful up close— the craftsmanship is extraordinary. He can see the tuning pins and sound board, shadowed by the lid, and slowly he presses down on one of the keys. The note rings out, lingering and echoing around the room with a soft rebound.

"Do you like it?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy turns to face him. The older prince is standing in the doorway, leaning against the door with his arms crossed. Tommy blinks.

"I—" He's at a loss for words. He turns back to the keys and gently presses another, listening to the pure, beautiful note.

"Sally will be coming up to the palace once a week," Wilbur continues. "To give you lessons."

"Is this a present for me or you?" Tommy asks, finally getting control of his words. It's a gorgeous instrument, but he raises a brow as Wilbur splutters.

"*You*," he insists. "It's a gift for you."

"Sure," Tommy drawls, and Wilbur scoffs. He takes a moment to pull out the bench and sit gingerly on it, skimming his hands over the keys and settling into position. He taps out a simple tune, and can't help but smile. When he looks up next, Wilbur is beside him. He shifts over, and the prince takes the invitation and sits beside him on the bench. It's just big enough for two, and after a moment Wilbur reaches out and rests his hands on the keys.

“Do you know Heart and Soul?” He asks. Tommy nods. It’s a beginner song, one he knows quite well from his lessons back in the Isles. Wilbur grins, and Tommy moves to put his hands on the keys and when Wilbur nods, plays the lower part.

They stumble over one another, not used to playing in sync, and while Wilbur nods along a tempo it’s hard to keep up. Tommy challenges him— plays faster, quicker, lighter, but Wilbur doesn’t say a word. He just plays along, keeping up the best he can with his fingers flying along the ivory. By the end of it Tommy’s slowed down again and settled back into their original tempo, the right one, and with a flourish Wilbur finishes them off. Tommy keeps his hands on the board as Wilbur smiles over at him.

“So you like it then?” He asks. Tommy glances down at his hands, bringing them to his lap, and nods.

“Yeah,” he admits. “I do.”

“It was my idea,” Wilbur says, leaning back some with a grin. “My mother was ecstatic to carry it out. She really adores you, you know.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Tommy grumbles. Kristin is nice, sure. She clearly enjoys Tommy’s company, and he’d have to say that out of the entire royal family, she’s the one he likes the most. Thinking of her brings no small amount of guilt to his mind, though, and glancing over at Wilbur he’s hit with it as well; the older boy is smiling at him, making something evil and wrong and *warm* curl in his stomach and making him feel like he’s been taken ill. Wilbur’s face falls for a second, concern on his brow.

“You alright?” He asks.

“Fine,” Tommy grunts, and he glances away, staring down at the piano. The gifts— this is just meant to keep him complacent and happy, like a little bird who’s been caged. He hasn’t forgotten Wilbur treating him like a birthday present, and refuses to let it slip from his mind.

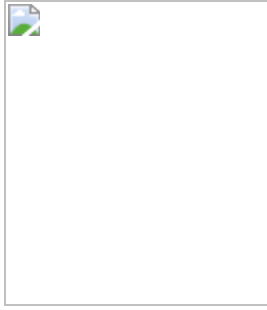
“You know,” Wilbur says, continuing after a moment. “I’ve always thought music was special. Connective. No matter where you go on this Continent, there will always be someone who can sing, or dance, or play. Even if it’s a different language.”

“...what the *fuck* are you on about?” Tommy asks. He wrinkles his nose, and Wilbur smiles, shrugging.

“Music, man,” he says lightly, turning back to the piano and letting his fingers drift across the keys. “Just music.”

Wilbur leaves after a bit, and Tommy finds himself sitting at the piano without him anyways. It really is a beautiful gift, one he can barely keep his hands off of. By the time he finishes tapping out a tune, the keys are grimy with his fingerprints and the pedal has a spot of dirt on it from his shoe. Imperfect, but still beautiful. He smiles lightly and reaches out to play again.

Wilbur had left his door open on the way out. Tommy doesn’t get up to shut it— he lets the sound carry.



Three days and change later, and Purpled comes to his door at midnight.

“Quiet,” he says, and Tommy is so good at being quiet so he shuts his mouth and glares instead of telling him so. “Come on.”

Tommy is practically bouncing on his feet. He’s excited. He’s nervous. He’s thrilled. There is revenge coming, thick and sweet in the air like the calm before the storm. He always loved a good monsoon, and he can taste lightning on his tongue as they descend into the depths of the castle.

There is a certain dread, down here. The dread of capture. Someone could easily wake up for a drink in the middle of the night— Tommy has not forgotten Technoblade finding him in the kitchen— and stumble upon them as they walk, the hallways only lit up by the light of the moon. They don’t risk a torch, but even without it Purpled moves steadily and surely, his feet silent as he walks and taking the occasional shortcut that Tommy had no idea even existed. By the time they reach the basement area where the kitchens are, he’s utterly forgotten the way they came. But instead of going through the kitchens, Purpled takes a left by the door and heads down, further into the storage areas. It gets darker and darker, until finally they’re forced to snap a runestone that sheds light over their skin and makes the whole hallway seem haunted.

Further and further down. It gets colder as they go, too, and Tommy sticks close behind Purpled. He’d gotten dressed for the occasion, but hadn’t even thought to bring a cloak. The domestic wing of the palace is always warm, even with the occasional drafts and chilly stone. He shivers slightly, until finally they come to a stop in front of a door. It looks like any other door in the hallway— wooden, plain, not even a proper latch on the handle. Tommy stops behind Purpled as the boy softly knocks, once, then twice, then four times, then once again.

“Manacle,” he says quietly. There’s the sound of shuffling behind the door, and then the latch clicks and it swings open. Punz fills the space— blond hair dark in the light, but behind him Tommy can see a faint orange glow and warmth spilling out from the room. He can barely make out some boxes over his shoulder before he shuffles, blocking the entire view.

“Swan,” he says. His face is impassive, impossible to read. Tommy stares at him as Purpled says a word back in kind.

“Goose,” he says. Punz flicks his gaze to Tommy, then a crooked smile plays out over his lips and he opens the door for them both, beckoning them inside. Tommy barely has time to notice how the older man steps out into the hallway behind them (guard duty?) as Purpled shuts the door, because he’s too busy staring into the room before him. He was right; it is

filled with crates and boxes of all sorts of storage, probably non perishable food items. But that doesn't matter, not anymore.

The room is filled with *people* .

Clustered along walls and packed around a rickety wooden table, warm from the heat of bodies pressed against counters and one another. Tommy takes a moment to catch his breath, fingers digging into his own wrist in order to steady himself.

There are a few faces he recognizes even in the dim light– the first is someone he has not seen in months, and he doesn't hesitate to throw himself forward and into Sapnap's arms. The other man has always run warm, arms strong and good for hugging. Sapnap carries himself like a knight even now, despite having lost his station ages ago. Tommy clasps his hands around his forearm and grins.

"Tommy," Sapnap says with a breath. "Good to see you, man."

"Hi," Tommy says, a little breathless. "Where's– George?"

"Here," someone calls out, a hand raising behind Sapnap. Tommy lifts his head to find him, that dark hair the longest he's ever seen it. George usually keeps it short– there are bags under his eyes, a tired look on his face. Tommy lets go of Sapnap in order to hug him too, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and grinning into the soft collar that rises on his neck. A hand pats at his arm, and Tommy lets go, pulling away to just look at him.

He takes a second to glance around the room– there's another guy with dark hair, a scar over one eye that Tommy dimly remembers from a terrified night in his bedroom. Karl is here, librarian robe gone and replaced with a neutral-colored uniform. There's another person as well, dark glasses over their eyes and a mop of brown hair that's pulled up high into a bun and a skirt swishing around their legs, long and dark red. Purpled is already sitting on one of the boxes, kicking his legs absently, and Dream smiles at him from against the far wall.

"Hi," his brother says, raising a hand in greeting. Tommy bounces on the balls of his feet. "Welcome home."

He can't hold it in anymore. Tommy rushes forward, throwing himself under Dream's chin and grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. He buries his face into his chest and just breathes, for a moment; his shirt smells like damp wood and the musty smell Tommy associates with libraries, like an old book cracked open for the first time in a hundred years. Underneath the stale bits though, he smells like sandalwood and pine, and Tommy sinks into it. Lavender. Home.

"I missed you too," Dream says with a laugh, and a hand rests on Tommy's back. Gently, he turns away, following the guidance without question. He surveys the newcomers in the room, the way they hold themselves, and composes himself just enough. Squares his shoulders and tips his head back, settling into regality like a worn, well-loved coat.

"Hello," he says. It echoes a bit, and Dream's hand presses down on his shoulder.



“Your Highness,” one of the unnamed people says, the one wearing the dark skirt. They move to stand, strands of their hair wispy around their ears. A short bow, low and elegant.

“Tommy, this is The Eret,” Dream says, introducing them with a smooth, even keel. “They’re a leader in the Empire’s runekeeper guild.”

“The Eret?” Tommy asks.

“It’s a title,” The Eret tells him, and nods again in deference when Tommy looks them over. “Eret is just fine, your Majesty.”

“Just Tommy is fine,” Tommy tells them, reaching out with one hand and grasping Eret’s firmly in his hand. He shakes it once before letting go. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And you.” Eret smiles, drawing back as Dream gestures to the next person Tommy doesn’t know. Except, he does, but only by the light of the moon.

“This is Alex Quackity,” Dream says. “He was on that list of names you gave me. A spider.” Someone who deals in the underhangs of buildings, then. Someone who can scale fifty-foot walls with just their hands and feet and the cold ice below them. Tommy nods.

“We’ve met,” Quackity says, eyes crinkling when he smiles. A spark of mischief glints in them, one that is almost identical to the countless looks Tubbo had given him when in the Underground. He thinks they might get along well. “I heard you met Schlatt.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “I did. You work for him?”

“Worked. Past tense.” Quackity shrugs, a roll of his shoulders that’s fluid and calm but Tommy can see the remnants of tension underneath. “I’m currently on the market.”

“No you’re not,” Karl chimes in, sidling up to where Quackity is sitting on a huge crate and leaning against it.

“That is not what I meant,” he argues, a flush rising in his cheeks as Karl flashes a grin at Tommy, reaching out to put his hand over Quackity’s.

“Ew,” Tommy cuts in. “That’s gross.”

“Oh, you’re going to love this,” George mutters from off to his left and Tommy turns to look at him, raising a brow.

“Love what?” he asks. Beside George, Sapnap raises his hand and twists it, so a sparkling piece of metal on his finger glints in the light. Tommy squints at it, then him. “What?” Then, something clicks; he turns to look at Quackity and Karl, who both have—

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Tommy says, tipping his head back and letting out a long-suffering groan. Dream is laughing quietly behind him, George smiling. “I leave for a month and you get *married*?”

“Engaged,” Sapnap corrects.

“How are like, 25% of the people I know *engaged*,” Tommy laments. “What the fuck.”

“Hey, not to be that guy,” Purpled cuts in, still swinging his feet as he sits, “and I know all this catching up is supposed to be cute, but we don’t have a lot of time tonight. Can we maybe get on with the show?”

Fuck. “Right.” Tommy blinks. He can press Sapnap for juicy details later, after they’ve won. “Right. Uh. I have two other people who aren’t here but are going to help– Tubbo Underscore and Ranboo Beloved.”

The room goes quiet. Quackity breaks the silence with a whistle, low and heady.

“Damn,” he says. “Someone made rich friends.”

“Tubbo’s a genius with engineering,” Tommy says, although he has a feeling most of the people in this room know that already. “Ranboo is politically-minded and– well, he’s okay I guess.”

“Promising,” George mutters.

“Shut up,” Tommy bites at him, no vitriol truly in his voice. “They’ll help us, but I’ll be keeping the most contact I think, since they’re both away.”

“That’s fair,” Dream says, and Tommy snaps his head up to look at him once more. “Keep them at the sidelines for now, but engineering is a good skill to have.”

“So, what,” Sapnap says. All heads turn to him. He holds out a hand, counting off on his fingers. “We have Dream, me for muscle. George and Eret for magic shit, Quackity sneaking around, Purpled and Punz as more muscle, Tommy and Karl to get us in and out of the palace and get us info, and then Underscore for blowing shit up? The council member for political shit? That’s...” Sapnap holds up his hands. “Eleven people.”

“Eleven people to pull off a coup,” Purpled says. “Wow, I love our odds.”

“We have some guardsmen on our side as well,” Dream cuts in. “About twenty.”

“So, thirty people to pull off a coup.” Purpled corrects himself, hunching forward to put his elbows on his knees and chin in hand. “Still not great.”

“It’s all we can afford right now,” Tommy argues. “There– when I was in Libra and the Vaults, there were some people who supported me. I could get more. But we need to take out the Emperor and the royal family.”

“We create a power vacuum,” Dream explains, and Tommy nods. “With that, it becomes easy to take control of the nation.”

“Gentlemen, the Empire is fiercely loyal,” Eret cuts in. “The people, the workers, the soldiers.”

“*You’re* here,” Tommy points out. Eret spreads their hands open wide in front of them, nodding.

“That’s true,” they say. “Very true. But I am a minority. There will be backlash from the public. The royal guard will not go down without a fight.”

“We’re prepared for a fight,” Dream says. “I don’t think a violent overhaul is in our best interests, either. We take out the necessary people and then fill the spots.” His eyes are on Tommy now, waiting. Expectant.

Tommy swallows. “The Emperor,” he says. “The Empress, the General, and W— the crown prince. The, uh, the power split with advisors occasionally but Philza is the one in charge.”

“And the prince?”

“As hoity-toity as a fucking lord, truly insufferable, and weak. He prefers music to working to grow as a leader.” Tommy thinks of the piano in his room, and Wilbur’s long face. “He— I don’t think it’s all his fault. Philza isn’t exactly open with him. Or me.”

“So in order of importance, who do you think we should focus on?” Dream asks. Tommy tips his head.

“Philza,” he says. “Then the general. Wilbur. Then Kristin. She—” Tommy sighs. “She’s kind.”

“She’s a threat,” Dream corrects him. “I know she takes a backseat most times, and you were young, but she has taken to the battlefield too. She runs the Empire just as much as the Emperor does.”

“She’s the least threatening to—”

“She’s still a danger, Tommy,” Dream says, sharp and something lingering in his tone. Tommy falls back, retreating tactfully into his own head. “We’ll take her out that night, just like the others. You need a full claim to the throne. There can be no room for error.”

“Right,” Tommy says. “Of course.”

“So we’re killing them?” Quackity asks. “That it?”

“Yes,” Dream says. “We’ll be setting up the prince as well, to keep most of the blame off of Tommy and allow him to enter rule as peacefully as possible.”

“The prince should be killed last, then,” Purpled says. “Make it look like a suicide.”

“Could you do it?” Dream asks, turning his head to look at him. Purpled nods slowly, and then again. “Good. Karl, we’re going to need maps of the palace.”

“I can get them,” he says, smiling. “Easy.”

“And what do we get out of this?” Eret asks, piping up once more. “After this is all over. You’ve promised us coin for now, but it’s no secret that the Isles’ royal coffers are lower than they could be. We’re risking our necks for you.”

Dream is quiet. Tommy blinks, and then nods.

“I... understand your concern,” he says, drawing on every lesson he’s ever had on public speaking, every conflict he’s settled in court, every advisor he’s shot down the ideas of. “It’s dangerous, and some of us might not make it out alive. It’s a risk. You being here now is a risk. And I thank you for taking it. It’s scary. I’m scared.” It’s the first time he’s said it aloud, he thinks. At least in front of Dream. He watches as the faces in the room turn to him, and Tommy settles his own nerves. “I am. But I want my home back, and what the Empire did... it wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair. And now I’m a prisoner and my people are in shambles.” For a second, a memory flits through his mind. The fields outside Caterwaul, shining and full. The memory of Philza and Technoblade explaining the food situation to him, the barns full of rotting taxes. Tommy falters for a moment, but he can’t press Dream now. “I– I get it if you don’t think the risk is worth the reward, but I promise you, when we succeed, there will be a reward.”

“Money?” Purpled clarifies.

“So much fucking money,” Tommy confirms. “And land, for you. And a place in court. I would owe you my life, my kingship.”

“A valuable thing,” Eret mutters.

“I’m in,” Quackity says. When all eyes turn to him, he shrugs. “What? I have nothing better to do. Besides, Karl and Sapnap are here.”

“I’m always on your side, Tommy,” Sapnap says fondly. George, who has been twirling a knife between his fingers for Tommy’s entire speech, just gives him a curt nod. Eret hums, and then nods.

“Then you have my word,” they say. “An eye for an eye.”

“Dude,” Quackity cuts in. “What the fuck?”

“Oh, that’s not what I–”

Three sharp knocks sound out on the door, and everyone is immediately on edge. Purpled slides off the crate and so does Quackity– in the blink of an eye, he’s gone. Tommy stares at the door and waits.

“That’s our cue,” Karl mumbles. “We gotta get outta here.”

“You’re going?” Tommy asks.

“Can’t stay long,” Sapnap says, reaching out to ruffle his hair. “Stay awesome, your Majesty.”

“Wait, but—” Tommy turns, catching Dream’s sleeve with one hand. “Can you stay? Just a few minutes, I— I need to talk to you. About something.”

He needs to ask so many questions. Dream looks down at him, eyes softening just a tad before he nods.

“I can stay,” he says. “Purpled, stay outside the door.”

“Sure,” the boy says, and then people file out of the room. George is the last one out, shooting a look over Tommy’s head at Dream before the wood closes between them, trapping them in the small warm room.

Tommy turns, and Dream watches him.

There’s something about his gaze now— Tommy had been excited to see him earlier, ecstatic even, only minutes ago. But now he stands here and looks at Dream, just the two of them, and notices that things have changed.

It was inevitable, truly. Tommy has been away for months, now— they’re toeing spring when he had been captured in the fall, and Dream has been living a life on the run ever since. Things have changed between them, even if there is still a familiarity beneath it all. Tommy’s not king anymore. Dream is no longer at his side every hour of the day, a guiding hand. Tommy is lost without him; it’s a sobering thought, but it’s true. He’s been trying so hard to just make it through every day and he’s gotten this far, but it’s been fucking hard. Dream’s hair is longer, Tommy notes quietly. A dark blond, pulled into a low ponytail behind his head. His clothing isn’t the finery he used to wear, the bright green shades he preferred. Instead it’s dull, the neutral tones of a commoner and the blues of the Empire. They’re both wearing blue, Tommy notes. Doing what they must to survive.

“What did you want to ask me?” Dream asks, quiet. He sounds tired.

“I—” Tommy gnaws on his lip, suddenly uncertain. “It’s probably nothing.”

“I mean, usually when people say that, it is something,” Dream says, smiling a little bit. Tommy smiles back, but it falls just as quickly.

“Why did you leave me alone in the throne room?” he asks. It’s not the question he’s burning to ask, but it’s a question.

“Tommy, I told you before,” Dream says. “I tried to get to you. We just were too late.”

“But where were you?” Tommy asks. “How did you escape? How did you get out of Caterwaul? I saw the city, Dream— they had every road in and out locked down. They had camps set up outside the walls.”

“It wasn’t impossible,” Dream says quietly. “It took a lot of luck.”

“I just don’t understand how you could leave me—”

“I didn’t want to leave you, Tommy.” Dream steps forward, reaching out to cup his cheek. “Tommy, please. I would never.”

“But you did,” Tommy whispers, thick threads of betrayal slicing through his stomach and snapping when Dream speaks next.

“I won’t ever again,” he says, and it’s promise and truth in one breath, cold as ice and smooth as malt. Tommy feels his heart lift a little bit– they’re brothers in arms. Literally now, and as Tommy chews his lip he can taste blood. “I promise.”

“You’ve broken those before,” Tommy says quietly, and Dream shakes his head.

“Not this time,” he says. “Not this one. We’ve got a chance now, Tommy, can’t you see it? Revenge. It’ll be sweet. And I will never leave you behind. We can see each other more often now, okay? I mean, not *every* day. But enough to plan and get things ready behind the scenes. You trust me, don’t you? Of course you do.”

“Of course I do,” Tommy parrots, and he means it. “Dream, you’re my– you’re the only one on my side right now. My only friend.”

“You’ve got Sapnap,” Dream says quietly, “and George. They’re always loyal to you too, you know that.”

“It’s not the same,” Tommy tells him. “Not like you.”

“Well,” Dream smiles at him. “You need me. I know you do. And you have me. You can trust me. I promise I will never leave you behind.”

Tommy eyes him, swallowing warily, and then asks: “If I can trust you, why didn’t you tell me about the food stores in the countryside? The ones in the barns that were left to rot?”

Dream’s face is impassive. He’s smiling still, but the light from his eyes drops sharply as he processes what Tommy’s asking. His smile slowly fades, and he looks confused, and then opens his mouth and exhales slowly.

“What do you mean?” he asks, but Tommy can see behind the fucking lie.

“Don’t lie to me,” he hisses, anger bubbling up. His and Dream’s relationship is not perfect– they’ve gotten into spats before and Tommy trusts him, but the dishonesty makes him want to curl up and die. “Philza told me about it. All transported there under royal order. Dream. What was it? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It–” Dream backpedals. “It was emergency stocks, Tommy. For us. I knew things were going south and we had so little time, so I took it upon myself to just put some food aside for us. We were going to have to run, and so I knew we’d need the supplies. I did it without asking or telling you, I’m sorry. I know. I know you’re mad. But it was for you.” Tommy is still scowling, but... that makes sense. If they had escaped the siege, they would’ve needed things. A place to go, food to eat. He softens, just some, and Dream continues: “I should’ve told you. I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t you?” Tommy asks, a murmur. Dream steps forward, a hand on Tommy’s shoulder and eyes so soft.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” he says. “You were already so stressed. Please, Tommy, try to understand.”

“I just—” Tommy inhales. “Finding it out from Philza wasn’t the best.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I need to trust you, Dream.”

“I know. And I’d never do anything to hurt you, Tommy. You know that, right? Everything I do is for your own good.” Dream tips his head, then draws Tommy in. A hug, soft and gentle and warm. Tommy holds back tears as his fears are soothed, his uncertainty firming into solid trust. He can trust Dream. He *has* to trust Dream, because if he can’t, he really doesn’t have anyone else left. They’re in this together. “I’m sorry,” Dream whispers, and he sounds soft and sad and sincere.

“It’s okay,” Tommy whispers back, because what else can he say? He needs Dream. Dream needs him, too, and he can tell by the way the man’s grip on his back becomes crushing, nearly pushing all the breath out of him as they stand there in the quiet lamplight and just breathe. In and out together, and Tommy can almost imagine they’re home.

“You need to go,” Dream says eventually, his fingers letting go of the crumpled blue silk of Tommy’s shirt. Tommy pries himself apart, reaching up to rub one eye. He’s truly fucking exhausted, but he doesn’t want to go despite it. “Get some rest. We’ll meet again in a week’s time, once Karl’s gotten us the maps.”

“Alright,” Tommy whispers. And then, like a declaration of love twisted: “I trust you.”

Dream’s smile is quiet and hopeful and honest. “I hope so.”

## Chapter End Notes

ART FORTHIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#) AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

THINGS ARE GOING TO START PICKING UP!!!! MUAHAHAHAH  
five more chapters to go i think, if i get everything in place the way i want it to be. :)  
that's insane. this is the longest story ive ever written and will have completed fyi.  
crazy!!!

so what are you predictions for how this is gonna work out? i want to know what you guys think or are expecting to see :eyes:

-

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)



## arc V. - swing your razor wide

### Chapter Summary

tws: blades

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Despite the excursion the night before, Tommy finds himself awake before the sun.

It's not that hard. While the days have stretched on longer and longer, creeping towards the summer solstice, there is still a noticeable difference between night and day. The boundary between each is quiet and intangible, and Tommy stares out his window as he traces shapes in the frost, one finger dragging quietly across the glass as he thinks.

There's a lot to think about. Too much, almost. In the light of the rising sun, Tommy is forced to ponder it and turn it over in his mind. Everything Dream had told him, everything that had happened. He has allies; friends, people he can count on. Dream is obviously highest in that hierarchy, but Tubbo and Ranboo are a close second. He considers writing them both a letter, but he can't take it upon himself to move. The window is too appealing, and he is eager to watch as the sky gets lighter and lighter. He'd dragged a chair over by the window, one of the plush ones with their crushed velvet seat and straight seams, a blanket draped over his shoulders as he stares out and draws penises in the fog on the glass. He could crack it open. He wonders how many windows are on this side of the palace— he'll find out soon enough when Karl gets them the blueprints to each level. That is something he keeps thinking about. The inner workings of the palace, how it functions. He needs to know. He needs to get an in on it, and again and again his mind comes back to the royal family.

They're not his friends, he reminds himself. He needs to think about it more often. The red and orange dawn is barely over the mountains when there's a knock on the door behind him.

He twists in his seat. It's barely morning. Unlikely for anyone else to be up, except maybe the General? A maid? Purpled?

"Come in," he says, because honestly an assassin would not knock, so he's not worried. As he watches, the handle turns, and then the door opens and—

The Empress walks in.

"You're up," she says, sounding surprised. Tommy blinks once, then twice.

"So're you," he notes. She laughs— and with a mild start, Tommy realizes she's not dressed. She's in a nightgown and house dress still, delicate lace around her shoulders and her arms

bare. Tommy realizes with a start that it might be the first time he's seen her without long sleeves. Her slippers are blue and fuzzy. Her hair is down, long and dark as it tumbles down her back and her eyes are void of their usual makeup, lips neutral instead of red. "Why are you up?"

"This is the start of our morning," she says with a smile, coming over towards him and letting the door shut gently. She leans over his head to peer out the window at the steadily climbing sun. "It's beautiful when it comes over the mountains, isn't it?"

Tommy glances back over his shoulder. "Yeah," he says. "It is."

"Do you watch the sunrise often?"

"No. I like sunsets more. They're more vibrant."

"Sunrises last longer."

"They're a bitch to get up for."

"I suppose you're right." The empress laughs, quiet and subdued. "Will you come with me, Tommy? Leave your sunrise behind?"

"What for?" Tommy is wary, watching her and pulling his blanket more firmly around his shoulders. She crosses her arms over her front, tipping her head as she pulls her housecoat tighter around her middle.

"Phil wanted to ask you something," she says. Tommy blinks, wide and owlish. Philza wanted to ask him something? This early in the morning? The Empress catches onto his confusion quickly, adding on: "Nothing bad. It just means you need to be ready by a certain time, so he wanted to catch you early. Techno had mentioned a sleepless night, so I figured I would come check."

"Snitch," Tommy mumbles, but he's had a relatively sleepless night and so if his anger is muted, that must be why. He moves to stand, shuffling away from the window and watching Kristin step backwards with a smile. "I'm already up."

"If you don't want to, you don't have to," Kristin says gently, but Tommy waves a hand.

"Whatever," he says. She fixes him with a look.

"If you're going to be a brat about this..." she says, a bit warningly. "You're a wonderful thing, but I'd rather not start a fight before sunrise."

"I'll be as much as a brat as he deserves," Tommy promises, and Kristin laughs.

"I'll take it," she muses as he tugs on a pair of his own slippers, grabs a light jacket for the cold hallways. "And I suppose Phil could use a bit of brattiness to drag him down."

"Is that permission?" Tommy asks, and she laughs again, louder now.

“I didn’t say anything,” she says, smiling as Tommy shuffles towards the door, yawning just a bit as he goes. Her face is fond, and as he passes she reaches out to gently ruffle his hair. “I missed you.”

“What?” He turns, pausing on the threshold. Kristin is still smiling, and she stops just behind him as he does.

“I missed you,” she says, quiet and honest. “When we were traveling, you were busy with the Underscore and Beloved. Understandable– they’re a fun duo, and it’s so nice to see you making friends.” Her smile grows more and more fond, until it’s nearly unbearable. Tommy’s eyes burn. She leans in and presses her lips to his cheek; she smells like vanilla and cardamom. “But I missed you.”

He’s quiet as she brushes past him, through the doorway and into the passage beyond. He turns, and follows, and pretends like his first instinct hadn’t been to lean into her warmth.

He’s never actually been in Philza and Kristin’s room.

Nor Wilbur’s, for that matter. He’s only been in a select few around the palace and those two bedrooms– suites, honestly– had not been on the list until now. He steps over into the Emperor’s bedroom and wonders, for a moment, if trust is enough to kill.

Because this is trust, plain and simple, as Tommy stares down the Emperor of the Antarctic Empire in his fucking jammies with shaving cream smeared all over his chin.

“Phil,” Kristin says, moving further into the room and swinging around her husband, a hand on his shoulder and the other moving to wipe a dot of cream off his nose. “Tommy.”

“I can’t believe you sent your wife to do the dirty work,” Tommy cuts in. Phil meets his gaze in the mirror, and then breaks into a smile.

“You wouldn’t have come if it had been anyone else,” he says, and Tommy scowls because he’s right. The emperor looks away, and Kristin presses a kiss to his shoulder before she disappears into the next room over. Philza still isn’t looking at him even now as the door shuts, and Tommy leans against it. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“I would think so. Kristin said.”

“You gonna be short with me?” Philza glances up again, and Tommy’s breath stutters.

“No,” he says, quieter. His fingers scrabble against the door. How long would it take to turn around and open it, turn around and run–?

“Shame,” Philza hums, and then, “because the morning court has been gossiping about you for weeks, and it’d be a disgrace if your first introduction to them was anything but amusing.”

Now that throws him for a loop.

“Morning court?” he asks. Philza looks away from him, and Tommy watches as he opens a small drawer and pulls out a wooden object. A wooden object that then turns to metal, flipping open into a straight razor. Tommy stays right where he is by the door.

“I’d like for you to join me,” Philza clarifies. He dips the razor into a small pool of water below him, and Tommy is strangely intrigued as the man holds it to his face and carefully, starts to shave. “This morning,” he continues. “Come sit with me in court and go over some citizen complaints. Meet the advisors, all that.”

“You’d want me?” Tommy queries. Philza hums instead of answering. “Why? Why not Wilbur?”

“Wilbur... has a hard time with his temper,” Philza says slowly, as though he’s choosing his words with care. “He can join me another day. And you have experience. I’d like to see the experience in action.”

“Action,” Tommy parrots, and Philza nods, cleaning the shaving cream off his razor with a steady hand. Tommy glances down at it, and when he looks back up, Philza is watching him with amusement.

“Do you shave?” he asks. Tommy shakes his head mutely. “Has anyone ever taught you?”

He’d left Caterwaul before Dream could, so. No. He shakes his head again, and Philza places the razor down on the side of the basin, gesturing for Tommy to come closer. When nerves and anxiety bite at his heart and keep him from moving, Philza gestures again.

“I won’t bite,” he says. “Come on, let me show you. You’re fifteen. Every man should know how to shave properly.” Every man. Tommy steps forward once, twice, and when it seems like the Emperor isn’t going to shank him with a fucking straight razor, up to the wall beside him. Tommy leans against it, and Philza goes back to dragging a blade across his face. His hand is well-practiced, steady and firm, and Tommy is once again reminded of the fact that Philza isn’t just an emperor– he’s a practiced and seasoned warrior. He led the front lines of his army alongside Technoblade, and a blade is like an extension of his hand. He is deadly with it.

Tommy could try and kill him, right now. But it would do no good.

“The key to shaving,” Philza says, “is a steady hand.” He pauses whenever he speaks, and rinses the blade once more as the cream clings to it. “A smooth line, down from the top and up from the bottom. Against the grain.”

“Someone could do this for you,” Tommy notes. Philza hums.

“Kristin does, sometimes,” he says. “But I prefer to do it myself.”

“That’s weird,” Tommy tells him, and the man just laughs.

“30 degree angle,” he says. “Let the weight of the blade carry itself. If you press too hard or make any jerky movements, or have a dull blade, it will cut you.”

“Sounds complicated,” Tommy mutters. Philza drags the knife up his throat and leaves behind a smooth, clear layer of skin. He watches despite himself, eyes lingering on the calluses on the emperor’s knuckles, the scars on his hands, the gray in his hair. “And stupid.”

“The shaving cream is on the counter,” Philza comments lightly. “Oil first. It’s important. Lather it on and then use the cream. You take the brush and move in circles across your face.”

Tommy steps forward two steps and peers. There’s a small circular wooden box filled with a white cream, and a circular brush inside, bristles coated. Philza points with one finger to a bottle filled with oil, so Tommy goes there first.

It’s slick. It coats his fingers and makes him scowl, but dutifully he rubs it onto his cheeks. Then he wipes his fingers on his pajama pants which makes Philza sigh but he doesn’t care, reaching for the brush next.

A truly absurd amount of shaving cream later, and the entirety of Tommy’s lower face is white. He stares in the mirror, and Philza moves aside to make room for him. He’s still got about half to go, and so Tommy waits patiently, leaning against the wall after he’s pulled a few faces. It’s strange.

“What would I do in morning court?” he asks, genuinely curious and eager to fill the awkward silence.

“Sit and listen,” Philza says, pausing to scrape upwards. It makes a noise as he does, the sheathing of metal on skin. “And if I ask, give me your advice on the matter at hand.”

“Socialize with members of your court?”

“Among other things.”

“Do I get to eat breakfast first?”

Philza’s eyes are amused as he glances over. “Yes, Tommy, you get to eat breakfast first.”

From somewhere in the other room, Kristin’s voice floats over. “Growing boys!”

“Shut up!” Tommy snipes back, and he hear her cackle, long and loud.

“It’s two versus one,” Philza comments lightly. Tommy looks over. “I think we’re winning.”

“Three versus one,” Tommy corrects. “Wilbur too.”

“Wilbur would take my side,” Kristin chimes in.

“He’s a pussy,” Tommy says decisively, and she laughs again.

“Tommy!”

“What?” He scowls. “I’m right.”

“He told me about the piano,” Philza cuts in, smiling. “You liked it?”

“It was passable,” Tommy grumps. Of course he liked it. “I don’t need lessons, though.”

“Oh, actually mate, speaking of lessons,” Philza says, “I think I’m going to continue your tutorship. I think it would be good for you.”

“Why are you acting like you care?” Tommy asks, and Philza pauses. A moment, suspended in time, frozen between the both of them. The second passes, and he continues shaving, hands moving uniformly.

“I care about your future,” Philza tells him. “You know the terms. You are under my supervision at the moment and I think it’s important for me to... help push you in the right direction.”

“There is no right direction, only direction in general.”

“Who told you that?” Philza’s eyes meet him in the mirror. Tommy bites his lip. (The answer is Dream, obviously, but he won’t be saying that.) Both of them are quiet for a moment, and then Philza scrapes away the last bit of shaving cream from his face and rinses the blade. They’re quiet as he sets it aside, gently washes his face with a damp towel, and applies a bit of cream from another tin to his cheeks. Then, Philza steps aside and nods to the blade.

“Try,” he says.

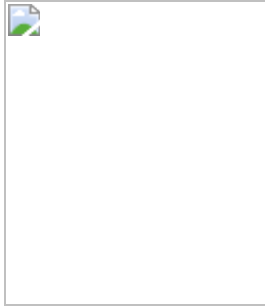
Tommy picks up the straight razor with one hand, holding the soft wood in gentle fingers. A weapon, truly, sharp and pointed. He stares in the mirror and Philza gives him another nod, so Tommy holds it up to his throat.

The emperor could kill him. Reach over with one of those scarred hands and force the razor into his neck, leaking lifeblood all over the floor.

Tommy lets the weight of the blade carry it downwards, smoothly leaving a line of clean skin in wake of the metal. Shaving cream gathers on the blade, and he gnaws on his lip. Gets some cream in his mouth. Spits it out with a yucky noise, and Philza laughs quietly. With minimal guidance and encouraged words from the emperor, sooner than later Tommy has a clean face. No cuts. He turns his head this way and that, peering at himself in the mirror. There really wasn’t any hair to shave away— he looks no different. But he feels different, strangely. As though there’s someone else looking at him from the mirror, a new, cleaner version. His hair is short again, face smooth and red, and there is a knife in his hand.

He feels powerful, oddly enough. The emperor lingers in his peripheral vision, an ever-present hover. A guide, this morning.

“Join me in morning court,” Philza requests, and Tommy, slowly, nods.



Tommy is not unfamiliar with court.

He had his own, back in Caterwaul. They held it every morning and every other afternoon when there wasn't anything else going on— his duties ranged from mediating minor squabbles to listening to petitioners to signing into effect legal documents. Dream had done a lot of the work until he was eight or so, and then he was just a voice in Tommy's ear. He'd entertained his advisors for the most part, worked the crowds that came to talk, and been king.

With Philza, things are a little different.

Both of them are dressed now, is one thing. No more pajamas, faces patted dry. The sun is up, shining through the long windows at the far end of the Great Hall and sending spattering color across the wooden floors. Philza is sitting in his throne, a board of advisors huddled to his left, and Tommy to his right.

Such a strange place, to be behind the emperor's shoulder. Tommy can see everything. He can hear everything. And he pays attention, too, even to the little things that may seem unimportant now. A noble raising his brow at a lady-in-waiting to the Empress, their eyes briefly meeting before flashing away. The way an advisor sneers when a merchant representative steps forward. Little gestures and clues in body language— he's learning the methods of this court, slowly but surely. Who likes who and all that.

Tommy wonders if this is how Dream felt, always hovering over his shoulder. It's a good place to be. The best part is, no one pays him any mind. They do, but they don't. They watch him with hooded eyes and whisper to one another about his presence, but they aren't taking him seriously. He fancies himself a parrot, gilded upon the Emperor's shoulder and decorated in all sorts of color to draw the eye, and secretly, slowly amassing a vocabulary worthy of any scholar.

Occasionally, Philza will turn to him and ask his opinion.

The first time it happens, it's a petty fight between two merchant noblemen. One is saying the other stole business from him, and to be fair, the case is pretty open and shut. The man *did* defame the other.

"Forty percent of what he makes this month," Tommy suggests quietly, low enough for Philza to hear and no one else. "As retribution."

"Hm." Philza turns away from him, surveys the two men in front of them at the foot of the dais— one is shorter and stout, and the other is tall and lanky. Both are red in the face. Philza

is quiet for a moment and then nods. “Forty percent of your earnings this month will go to him and his family. Thirty because of the business you stole, and ten for defamation.”

The tall, lanky man does not seem *happy*, but he accepts the decree without further arguing. Tommy is satisfied, and Philza catches his gaze with a lingering half-smile and mouths, *good one*.

The praise burns in his stomach. Partially because he’s pleased; he did a good job! Philza approved and even enacted what he suggested. He’s not so keen with the other advisor’s suggestions, but every time Tommy whispers in his ear or answers aloud (eyes track his every movement) Philza agrees. It feels good to settle into his role as leader again, Tommy slipping into it like a well-worn coat. It sits comfortably on his shoulders, maybe a bit lighter now that he’s not directly in charge, but it’s like a breath of freedom.

The other half of him burns with anger.

How dare Philza mock him like this. Asking his opinion and pretending like he cares. It’s easy to let Tommy play at being king, like how a baby plays with blocks or a toddler rides a wooden rocking horse. He has no real power here. Philza could easily override each and every one of his suggestions. But as time passes and the sun creeps along the floor, Philza goes from entertaining the common folk to entertaining petitioners, to finally discussing various legislatures that are being worked on due to their new... territory.

Yeah. Anger. Tommy squeezes his hands into fists and pretends like he’s paying attention, rage blinding him and filling his ears with static. Was this why Philza wanted him here? Did he just want to keep fucking rubbing it in his face? They’re talking about the Isles, about the fields of his home and Caterwaul, and—

“Tommy?” Philza asks. Tommy blinks.

“Yes?” It’s automatic. Had he been addressed? Shit. The whole court is staring at him.

“I asked if you had any input. The monsoon season is coming soon. When do you normally restrict travel?”

“I—” Wait— they’re asking him?

“You’re the expert,” Philza points out quietly.

“We—” Tommy swallows, and thinks back to his home and their procedures. He knows them all by heart, of course. “There are weather watchers. They should be— established, by now. In towers by the ports. If a storm is coming we warn incoming and outgoing ships, and halt any royal, or, uh, state transport. The farmers understand how to protect their crops on their own, but we reduce taxes on the...” He falters. “We reduce taxes until mid-summer. To account for any losses.”

The Great Hall is silent for a moment, and then Philza nods. He turns back to the array of advisors around them, nodding.



“We’ll keep the original policies in place,” he says. “Tommy, if you could possibly note approximate dates?”

Someone appears in front of him with a quill, ink, and paper. He glances down at it, and then hesitantly reaches out to scribble down the times in which they reduce tax rates and how much they reduce them by.

“It’s not the same every year,” he warns. “The sea and storms, they’re unpredictable.”

“Of course,” Philza hums, and he looks to be lost in minor thought as the papers Tommy had just scribbled down upon are taken away. His eyes are distant as he turns away, staring down at a map that has been set up in a small interim between cases and discussions. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Tommy says quietly.

The firing rage which had been present earlier has tapered off. In its wake, Tommy just feels... confused.

Morning court is for the morning. Once noon comes around, the sun high in the sky and the windows bright blue with cloudless cerulean, the court is dismissed for the afternoon and Tommy finds himself heading along to the library. He’s supposed to be having a tutoring session, which—ugh. Whatever. When he gets there, though, the tutor is nowhere in sight. Wilbur, however, is.

“Hello,” he says without looking up. Tommy hides behind a bookcase. Hiding is a very strong word, actually. He’s made a tactical retreat.

“Why are you here,” he deadpans, peeking between the shelves and staring. Wilbur isn’t looking back at him— he’s in an armchair, book open in his lap. Tommy scowls, shifting to poke his head around the corner.

“Scared off the old man who was here to teach you things you already know,” Wilbur says, and then he twists and meets Tommy’s gaze. “That alright with you?”

“Hmph.” Tommy steps out from behind the shelves fully now, but keeps one hand on the wood. “I guess.”

“What, don’t tell me you actually wanted to listen to him,” Wilbur drawls, and Tommy leaves behind the safety of the shelves entirely now as he steps forward, finding a spot on the rug to sink down in front of the fire. Wilbur watches him, legs crossed over one another and kicked up over the side of the arm of his chair, book held loosely in his lap. They stare at each other for a long, long moment.

“No,” Tommy admits. They fall into silence again. It’s unnerving, but Tommy refuses to be the first to break it. It’s a loss, and Tommy will not be a loser.

He doesn’t end up having to, in the end. “I don’t know how to act around you,” Wilbur admits into the open air. “Every time we talk, it’s as though there’s a new person in front of

me, with different motivations. You throw me off.”

“Is that a good thing?” Tommy asks, tipping his head slightly. Wilbur squints at him, lifting his hand to shove his glasses up higher onto the bridge of his nose.

“I’m not sure,” he admits. “I enjoy spending time with you.”

“You’re a dick,” Tommy counters, and Wilbur laughs.

“There it is,” he says, grinning wide. “See what I mean? Someone new every time.”

“Fuck off, I’m one person—”

“It’s like you’re changing for each person you meet—”

“—and don’t you dare imply otherwise, bitch—”

“—like you’re trying to get into their good graces by giving them what they want.” Tommy snaps his mouth shut, staring at him. Wilbur smiles, the noise from them talking over one another ringing in Tommy’s ears alongside his words. “Did I get it right? Are you just trying to please?”

“Please?” Tommy spits, curling his knees up to his chest. “You fuckers? No. No way.”

“My mother at least,” Wilbur continues. “It’s like you put on a mask for each member of the family. I’m not making fun of you, and it’s not a negative. Just interesting. And it makes me wonder how to act around you. I want to be your friend.”

“We can’t be friends,” Tommy tells him, scowling even deeper. “I refuse to be friends with you.” Not after everything.

Wilbur clearly considers this, watching Tommy quietly. “Alright,” he says eventually. “What about friendly?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Not friends, necessarily, but not antagonistic.”

“Stop using big words.”

“I won’t be an asshole, and you won’t be a vindictive bitch. Deal?” Wilbur leans forward, holding his hand out towards Tommy. Suspended in firelight, the sun streaming through the windows and making his skin glow. Like a beacon in the dark, and Tommy is the moth drawn to the flame, reaching out and slipping his fingers into Wilbur’s.

“Deal,” Tommy says. It presents an interesting opportunity, he thinks, gripping Wilbur’s warm hand in his own. They shake, and Tommy agrees to be friendly, and in turn Wilbur agrees to be kind. A mutual truce, until Tommy brings it down like acid rain around them, crushing any hope he sees flickering in his eyes. *Keep your friends close*, Dream whispers in his ear, *and your enemies closer*.

“So,” Wilbur says, leaning back as they loosen their grip and the deal is made. “What were you up to this morning?”

“Court,” Tommy sighs, leaning back and stretching out on warm carpet fibers like a cat. Wilbur’s rustling stops abruptly.

“Court?” he asks. “He took you to *court*? ”

“Yeah?” Tommy shrugs, wiggling in order to shed his jacket off. He tosses it across the floor, then stretches out again. “It was boring. Usually is.”

When he looks up next, there is something red-hot and familiar on Wilbur’s face, slowly increasing with intensity as he sits there. His fingers are clenched so tightly to the pages of his book that they crinkle, and Tommy leans back slightly, chewing on the inside of his cheek. So much for their deal.

“I see,” Wilbur says, short and clipped and angry. As he speaks, Tommy suddenly realizes something: he doesn’t think Wilbur is angry with *him* . “Well.”

And then he stands up sharply, movements brisk and cut-off. Tommy watches warily but without fear as the older boy heads across the library, setting his book down without bothering to tuck in a corner or use a bookmark to remember his place. It’s just left splayed on the chair, facing downwards.

“Where are you going?” Tommy chances, and Wilbur pauses by the door, hand on the knob.

“Somewhere else,” he says. “So I don’t start screaming at you and break our truce immediately.” The door opens and closes.

Tommy stares at the handle for a while, left alone with the flickering fireplace as company. When he gets the courage enough to move, he picks up Wilbur’s book.

It’s a fairy tale.



“Pup.”

Tommy drags his eyes up and away from his book and scowls.

“Uncle,” he snipes back. Technoblade visibly bristles.

“I am not your uncle,” he says smoothly, and then folds his legs beneath him until he is sitting criss-cross at the edge of the carpet where Tommy is laying. After Wilbur had turned tail and stormed out, angry at something, he’d had the entire library to himself for an hour or so. It had been nice to just lounge around and relax after the stressful morning, and he’d taken up Wilbur’s book and started from the beginning. It was long and complicated and entirely in Northal– not that Tommy minded, of course, he was fluent, but it’s about the principle of the matter.

“Why do you keep calling me pup, then?” Tommy asks. Technoblade tilts his head. Tommy hasn’t spoken to him like this for a while, just the two of them. They hadn’t restarted the sparring in the atrium either, although Tommy is aching to get to know more of the general’s fighting style. “It’s a term of familial endearment where I’m from. You even use the same word in everything, Sindan. I didn’t know you spoke it.”

“I speak most languages,” Technoblade says. “Except Ender.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t grow up with it. A language is much harder to learn in your adult years than it is for a child.” Technoblade shrugs. “Libra wasn’t yet revealed to us when I was young.”

“Right.” Tommy runs his tongue over his teeth, and then scowls. “So why do you call me pup?”

“For the same reason I call Wilbur family,” Techno drawls. “Mutually assured destruction and a deep distaste for your fashion sense.”

“What’s wrong with the way I dress?” Tommy squawks, and Technoblade laughs, deep and amused.

“Nothing,” he teases lightly. “It’s just– Wilbur has clearly rubbed off on you.”

“It’s cause it’s easier to tailor his old things,” Tommy mutters in defense, raising his hands to his biceps and rubbing them up and down as though he’s chasing away a shiver. “Not ‘cause I like it. I hate these colors.”

“I know you do,” Technoblade says. “You know, you did well in court today.” Tommy shrugs. “I’m being genuine.”

“It’s hard to tell sometimes.”

“Which is why I elaborated. You did good.”

The praise shouldn’t make him feel as good as it does coming from Technoblade of all people. He rubs harder at his arms, looking away and trying not to let his feelings show on his face and betray the warring states currently having a field day in his mind. “It wasn’t a big deal,” Tommy says, mumbling the words out between hesitant lips. “Just political shit.”

“You do political shit well,” Technoblade says.

“I was raised for it. Literally.” Tommy points to the top of his head with one hand.

“Right,” Techno says, leaning back for a moment and raising a brow at him. Tommy is almost offended— he scowls, opens his mouth to shoot something indignant and rude back at him, but Techno stops him before he can. “Are you cold?”

Tommy stops rubbing his arms. “No.”

“Then why do you keep...” Techno lifts his own hands up, circling them around himself. Tommy shrugs, and pointedly lets his own arms drop.

“It’s comforting, innit?” he says, and Techno pauses, then relaxes as well.

“Maybe,” he says. “Are you uncomfortable when I call you pup?”

Tommy thinks his glare is worth a thousand words. Based on the way Techno huffs in amusement, stumbling over his next words, then he was proven right.

“Fine,” the general says. “I’ll stop. But you have to promise to go along with Philza’s request to have you at court with no complaints.”

“Wilbur wasn’t happy about me being there.”

“Wilbur’s not happy about a lot of things.” There seems like there should be more to the statement, but Techno just stops. He sighs, and moves to stand, brushing imaginary dirt from his pants as he goes. Then he nods to Tommy. “It’s nearly time for dinner. I’ll tell Phil you were just finishing up tutoring.”

“I most certainly was not,” Tommy points out, scrambling to his feet and snatching his jacket, slinging it over his shoulder. Techno shrugs.

“Better come up with something fun you were learning about anyways,” he recommends. “You know. For when Phil asks.” Tommy hates that Phil is going to ask. He hates like the man is pretending to care, like he’s genuinely concerned. Tommy should be the least of his concerns— or at the very least, Phil should be focused on locking him up or some shit. Tommy hasn’t forgotten the threat of the island fort, Cormorant. It’s a very real possibility, and it frightens him. The thought of being surrounded by nothing on all sides, with nothing to do and no true escape to plan. No revenge plot.

He thinks if he were stuck on Cormorant, he might just throw himself off the nearest cliff into the freezing waters of the sea. At least there, he’d feel at home.

Techno is waiting by the door for Tommy to catch up to him, holding it open as they both traipse out into the hallway and back into the world beyond. As they’re leaving, a multicolored coat is waiting outside. Karl slips into the library behind them with a nod and a murmured greeting, deferential and completely ordinary to anyone unsuspecting. Techno’s eyes practically skip over the man entirely, but Tommy’s gaze lingers. Karl lingers in return, and as they pass, he feels something ruffle his jacket. The door to the library shuts behind them, and Karl is gone.

He waits until they're a few feet down the hall to shove his hand casually into his pocket.

A slip of paper falls into his grasp, folded neatly. Tommy runs his thumb over it, and suppresses a grin.



Punz is fucking bored.

A lot of his jobs require waiting. Hell— some of his jobs are only waiting, sitting around and doing nothing until the final moment where he stabs someone in the neck. Punz is used to being bored, but it doesn't get any easier. Sure, he could go outside. Sure, he could sneak under the palace walls and check on Purpled if he wanted, but he'd done that yesterday and it had been boring as shit in there, too. So he sits, and waits, and watches.

Dream is pacing again. By the time this coup is done with, Punz thinks he'll have worn a trench into the wooden floor.

It's not a bad basement, where they're staying. It's in Raven's Flight, in one of the lower Wards, rented out by some older woman with sharp green eyes and a knack for whittling. They'd been staying there for months now, and it's grown into something of a base of operations. A desk and a table, a curtain hanging across the room to separate it into sleeping and living space. The desk— a table, more like— is covered in papers, a few stray bags of coin laying here and there. He eyes them, then eyes Dream.

The man looks frazzled, to put it short. His shirt collar undone, hair uncombed for a few days now. He keeps running a hand through it, bringing his fingers up to the fringe and messing around. There are bags under his eyes. Punz lifts his drinking flask up to his mouth and watches, eyes tracing as Dream walks back and forth, back and forth.

"Papers," he mutters under his breath. "The map, the money, the— the armor and weapons."

Punz glances toward the pile of metal and armor in the corner. Yeah.

"You could forget this," he finds himself saying. The words slip from his mouth (tongue loosened by a few sips of liquor) without thought. Dream pauses, his foot hovering over the floor before he turns and squints at him. Punz continues: "I mean, it's dangerous. Just give it up. While there's still time, you know? Just kidnap the kid and go home with your tail tucked between your legs for now."

Dream squints harder at him, and then barks out a laugh. "Hah! You're funny. Good joke. Great joke, even. Shut up."

“You shut up,” Punz snaps back. He tips his flask towards him. “I’m not joking. Why would I joke about this?”

“You’re funny like that,” Dream drawls, and Punz gestures for him to come closer, fingers drawing him in until Dream is close enough that they mingle their breaths, heads tipped close. It’s tense. Dream is staring at him like he wants to rip his head off, but Punz knows he’s too valuable for it. It doesn’t scare him. Not like it maybe should.

Something has shifted, recently. Something important. He can’t pinpoint where it started to change, but it did, and now they’re here.

“Me? Yeah, sure,” Punz says, and he tips his head, scouring Dream’s expression as though it will hold the answers. He doesn’t really care if he gets them or not– he just wants the money at the end of the day. “I got you the house. I got you the intel. I’m getting you your kid.”

“And I’m grateful for it,” Dream says, twirling his hand between them and scowling. “You know that.”

“Which is why I’m giving you my advice now,” Punz tells him. “Be grateful all you want– if we lose this–”

“We won’t.”

“–then it will have all been for nothing. Take your wins where you can. Grab the kid and *get out* .”

Dream stares at him. Punz presses on.

“Have you thought this through?” he asks. “If we lose, we die. No doubts. The emperor will chop our heads off. Might take you to court, sure. Put on a clown show. But the death sentence is guaranteed for something like this. Do you care? You’ve got an in with the palace– we could sneak him away one evening and be gone by the time anyone knew he was missing. Low-risk.”

“It’s not just about Tommy,” Dream mutters, scowling a bit as he turns away, whipping his head back and forth and starting to pace once more. He starts to repeat the same argument Punz has heard a thousand times, and the other leans back in his seat, rolling his eyes. “It’s about power. It’s about the statement. The Empire wronged us, Punz. We’re going to give them a taste of their own medicine.”

“By destroying their family?”

“They destroyed mine!” Dream whirls around, and Punz just raises his flask in defense. “If everything goes wrong, none of *you* will be going down for it. You know this.”

“And you will?” Punz asks. Dream goes silent, and they stare at one another, quiet and tense.

“No one abroad will know our faces,” Dream mutters, whirling back around to face the other wall. “It’s safer. You have your outs, I have mine.”

“What were you just saying about family—?”

“It is a *contingency* plan. I have a thousand of them. Go to hell, Punz.”

“It’s nice to know I’m appreciated.” Punz just lifts his drink to his mouth, and sighs. Dream is stressed— he knows this, knows the words made of ice will melt once he comes off of it. If things do go their way, he’s in for one hell of a payout. If they don’t, well. Contingency plans. Dream stalks over to the desk, stress lining every feature he has as he bends down over the papers and marks absently with a pen. Punz watches him. After some time, speaks up again. “I’m just being logical.”

“Go to hell,” Dream repeats. “If you’re in you’re in. You can’t toe the line.”

“I’m not,” Punz assures, downing another swallow of liquid fire. It burns. He pushes the thoughts of Purpled out of his mind. “I’m not.”

“Good,” Dream murmurs, and still staring at their plans on the desk, sighs. Speaks as though he’s the only one in the room, quiet and under his breath. “I’m getting him back. I’m getting him back.”





ART FORTHIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#)AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

the calm before the storm.

i'm posting this as we go see hadestown!!! im so excited :)

-

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment  
:)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or  
[tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently  
hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause  
bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc V. - all these minutes passing

### Chapter Summary

tws: child abuse

thank you to tem/definitelynotshouting for being a LOVELY LOVELY HUMAN!!!! and also for beta'ing this chap :)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“This is how it’s going to work.”

It’s a late night in the Empire. All of them have bags under their eyes, and Tommy, not wanting to miss out on a few crucial hours of sleep, is in his pajamas this time. Even if he has to wake up a little before midnight to get down here— well, he wants to get his sleep in when he can. Especially since after meetings like these, he’s usually too keyed up to do so.

Dream is across the table (a rickety thing, four wooden legs that wobble when one of them leans too hard on it) with a hand stretched out to point at the map below him. It’s slightly faded, a copy of a copy, but it’s clear enough. It shows the blueprints to almost the entire palace; some small secrets might be hidden, like the gateway from the Fourth Ward to the palace that Wilbur had shown Tommy, but for the most part it’s accurate. He points to the wing opposite the domestic wing where Tommy’s room is. “We divert them here,” he says. “Some sort of distraction. Something in the middle of the night, so everyone is a little more confused and we have darkness on our side. Me, Sapnap, George, and Punz will be over here when it goes off. Tommy will be waiting in the Great Hall. Purpled will be dealing with the crown prince. Eret, you and Quackity are on guard duty. Take as many out as possible, and meet up with the ones loyal to us here.” Dream points to another corner of the map, right beside the royal guard’s barracks.

“What about Ranboo and Tubbo?” Tommy cuts in.

“They’re arriving tomorrow, right?” Dream asks. Tommy gives a curt nod— that’s the current plan. He’s been exchanging letters back and forth, and finally proposed the idea of them coming to the Empire after about a month. Planning has been on and off; they’ve only been able to meet a few times in that time span, and it’s throwing Tommy off his game. He only has so many people he can talk to about shit like this, and Purpled is often gone doing things to make his cover story functional. Karl, too. Tommy is brutally alone with the royal family, and it’s starting to grate on him.

(The worst part is, he can’t even tell if it’s because he’s started to enjoy his time with them, albeit... awkwardly.)

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “‘Bout noon.”

“So we’ll try and get a meeting in before the week’s end.” Dream looks down at the map once more.

“What night?” Eret asks. Tommy enjoys Eret. They’re smart and witty, and their deep voice is very imposing and magical. They’re exceptional with runes— Tommy is wearing a bracelet now that they made, one for swift sneaking and silence. It allows them to speak freely and not have to worry about anyone passing by the hall and hearing their voices, although Dream still makes Punz keep watch. “We do not want to drag this out and give anyone an opportunity to change their minds.”

“By the solstice,” Dream says.

Tommy gapes.

“That’s in two weeks,” Sapnap says sharply. “Do we have time to do that?”

“How fast can Underscore build a bomb?” Dream asks, turning to Tommy, and he stammers.

“I– I mean, I don’t– I–”

“How fast?”

“Fast, for Prime’s sake, I assume it’s fast!” Tommy scowls. “Don’t you think that’s too soon?”

“Why would it be too soon?” Dream is stony when he looks up at him, green eyes meeting blue. Tommy stares right back.

“Less time to make sure we have our arses covered,” Tommy says. “Less time to make sure there’s no holes.”

“There won’t be holes.”

“You don’t know that–”

“Tommy, shut *up* .”

Tommy snaps his mouth shut. The room is quiet, and even in the dim light Tommy knows they can see his face burning red with anger and embarrassment. Dream sighs, heavy and long, and presses a hand to his forehead as he does. “I understand your concern,” he says after a moment, and Tommy keeps his mouth shut. “But things are dragging on too long already. The Empire is gaining more and more of a foothold each day. Tommy, I know you see it.”

And Tommy does. He’s been attending court with Philza nearly every other day, now. His presence there is normalized; Philza keeps asking him for his input and utilizing it. It’s strange.

“They’re not tyrants,” Tommy begins, and a cold hush falls over the room. He presses on. “They’re just men. Not monsters. I don’t even think we should be killing the Empre—”

“Tommy,” Dream says. His face is stony as Tommy looks across the table to him. One hand firmly presses down on the wood as he pushes himself over, moving with a strange, cold grace.

“Tommy,” he repeats after a moment of silence. “Can I talk to you for a moment?” He casts a look around the room. “Just us.”

After a second, Tommy moves to stand as well. He says nothing as they both head for the door, leaving the room hushed behind them. Tommy passes by Punz as he goes, and the older man slips inside the door as they move into the hall. It’s colder out here, but Eret’s rune helps.

The door shuts. Tommy waits.

“What is wrong with you?” Dream finally asks, turning around to face him head on. That stony coldness from before is gone— in its place, anger so fierce that Tommy has to force himself not to flinch backwards. “Seriously, Tommy, what the hell? If you’re not going to—”

“I’m sorry,” he bites out, interrupting before Dream can continue. “I’m sorry, I just— this is fucking hard, Dream. I’m losing hair over this, I’m— every day I have to just live and pretend I’m not— it’s hard.”

“Life is hard,” Dream says, taking a step closer. “Get used to it. A whiny king is no good. Are you quitting on me?”

“Of course not.” Tommy shakes his head fiercely. “No. I just. What if it doesn’t...”

He trails off. Dream raises a brow.

“What if it doesn’t work?” he asks, voice so hushed he might not have spoken. This thought has plagued him for weeks now, but he’s been too frightened to bring it up, especially to Dream. He’s so worried, so nervous, so terrified. “The Empire is strong, Dream. If we fail and something goes wrong, and we get caught, they won’t— they—”

Would Philza kill him?

“Stop thinking like that,” Dream says, stepping forward. “We’re too close to pull the plug on this. Cold feet never did anyone anything good. Get a *grip*. ”

His head whips to the side, and Tommy registers the sound before the actual sting. A sharp slap of flesh on flesh, Dream’s hand raised to the side and fingers spread wide. His cheek burns as the echo of the noise reverberates around the room.

(Inside, soft muttering dips into silence before rising once more.)

Tommy is literally struck silent, raising one hand to his face, fingers so, so cold against the warm heat of his cheek. Blood rises to the surface. He’s sure it’s already red.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers quietly, and Dream’s hand falls. He clenches and unclenches his fingers, and then after a moment, his face falls too.

“Tommy,” he says, swallowing hard. “Tommy, Tom– I–”

“Sorry,” Tommy repeats again. “I’ll shut up.”

“Prime, no,” Dream emphasizes. “No, never shut up. Tommy, I’m so sorry.”

A thousand hits, a thousand apologies. Tommy’s heard them all before, and his head spins even as he leans into Dream’s hands when he reaches out for him.

“It’s so fucking stressful,” Dream’s saying into Tommy’s hair, breath hot and harried.

“Everything, and I’m worried about you, and– I just can’t rest until we’re safe again. I don’t want to lose you. I can’t lose you. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

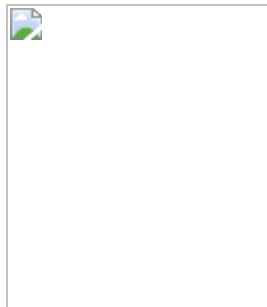
“It’s okay,” Tommy says blankly into his shirt. His eyes are open, but he can’t see anything. Dream rocks them back and forth.

“I can’t lose you,” he says, desperate. “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

“You won’t,” Tommy promises. It feels like someone else is piloting his body, wrapping their arms around Dream’s torso in a hug, murmuring back to him. “You won’t. I’m yours.”

“You’re mine,” Dream says, and he sounds relieved. Tommy swallows back the pain and hides his face in Dream’s chest.

“Yours,” he says.



“–and then I said no, Sam, you can’t actually see the person. It’s just their voice!”

Tommy nods, half-listening to Tubbo and half not paying attention at all. They’re outside, of all places, in the square of the palace just beyond the front doors that lead into the Great Hall. People mill about, busying themselves as the place prepares for a gala, of all things. A party. Tommy’s been invited, of course, but he’s debating not going.

“So it’s working?” Tommy asks.

“Sort of!” Tubbo chirps.

“It blew up,” Ranboo translates. “In Sam’s face.”

“All in all,” Tubbo finishes, “the demonstration went great. As it should’ve. I’d been up for twenty-six hours by that point.”

“You’re going to kill yourself from lack of sleep,” a fourth voice drawls, and it snaps them all out of the cheery conversation. Tommy jolts the farthest– he’s been flighty lately, and he knows people have noticed. He can’t help it. The smallest of movements have him on edge these days. Behind their seat on the wall, Purpled leans forward, drawstrings to his cloak draping between them as he leans forward and peers at them.

“What?” he asks after surprised silence. “It’s true. Lack of sleep can kill you.”

“Hi,” Tommy breathes. “Fuck, you scared us.”

“Hi!” Tubbo says. He sticks his hand out– has to awkwardly angle his arm to do it, but he does it. “I’m Tubbo.”

“Underscore, I know,” Purpled says, and takes it to shake. “You blow stuff up.”

“Not on *purpose* .”

“And you’re Ranboo Beloved,” Purpled notes, turning to Ranboo now. He looks him up and down. “Acceptable, I guess.”

“Wha– acceptable? Who– what?”

“This is Purpled,” Tommy introduces, and when the other boy glares at him, he shrugs.

“What? No one’s paying attention. Besides, I doubt Purpled is even your real name, much less Alexei.”

“Ooo, did you choose Purpled because purple is your favorite color?” Tubbo asks, tipping his head. “It’s Ranboo’s, too!”

“My favorite color is lavender, not purple. There’s a difference,” Ranboo corrects. Tommy rolls his eyes just as Purpled does; they make eye contact, then burst out into snickers that are hard to ignore. Tommy blinks, even as he smiles– he doesn’t think he’s ever seen Purpled smile properly before.

“So what do you do around here?” Tubbo asks, because Purpled is currently wearing the uniform of a palace servant: blue and white, with chrysanthemums across his chest. It’s similar to what Tommy’s got on, but Tommy’s is much, much finer.

“I’m this idiot’s babysitter,” Purpled explains, and Tommy scowls. “Eyes, ears, the whole thing.”

A meaningful glance is passed between all of them.

“I see,” Ranboo says. “Very cool. We’ll be seeing a lot of you then?”

“Hopefully not,” Purpled says. “That’s the whole point of being eyes and ears.”

“How old are you?” Tubbo queries. “You look about our age.”

“Sixteen,” Purpled says, and Tubbo claps his hands together.

“I was right!” he says with a grin. “Look at us! Except– Tommy, I suppose. You’re still fifteen.”

“Wow, what a baby,” Ranboo deadpans, and Tommy does not hesitate to turn and punch him in the shoulder as hard as humanly possible. Ranboo winces, but manages to keep an impressively straight face. Tommy knows he punches hard– he grew up scrapping with Dream, of course he does. Ranboo just bites his lip, bears it, and levels him with a flat look. “Ow,” he says, with an intonation that reminds Tommy scarily of Technoblade.

“Oh, I don’t fucking like that,” he says, verbalizing the thought. Ranboo blanches.

“I do not sound like him,” he says. “It’s the– it’s the accent. It’s the accent. I can’t believe you’re being so ignorant.”

“How does *Technoblade* of all people share an accent with you?” Tommy asks, incredulous. “He’s not even from Libra. He’s Empire, through-and-through. Bastard.”

“Where is he from?” Tubbo ponders. “I always wondered.”

“A tiny town, off the Kirnach. Something about fighting pits, I dunno,” Tommy says, flopping back onto the cool stones and letting his cloak flare out around him. Purpled swings his legs around to avoid him, staring down at him with a strange look on his face. Tommy glances up, then around. Even Tubbo and Ranboo are looking at him oddly. “What?”

“Did he... tell you that?” Ranboo asks. .

Tommy nods. “Sure,” he says. “I live with the guy, it’s not like we can avoid conversation. And out of the entire royal family, he’s... well, they all suck, but Techno’s not the worst. That’s Wilbur.”

“Techno,” Purpled says, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

“You spend enough time around the guy and he loses that mysterious luster,” he says, lifting his hands above his head and fiddling. “He’s such a bitch.” Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy can actually see Technoblade across the square, doing drills with some guardsmen and occasionally ordering people about. Getting security ready for the gala, probably. The air is full of noise, so he can’t make out the man’s words, but he can see his mouth moving and the glint of emerald and silver in his hair. Tommy’s own fingers go to his broach– the one he’s been wearing near daily for months now, the one Kristin gave him when he first arrived. It gleams in the midday sun, making him squint as he runs his hand over it and chews on the inside of his still-sore cheek.

“I’d bet,” Tubbo says. “He seems like a hardass.”

“He’s whatever,” Tommy says. “Unimportant.” His fingers dip and rise over the intricate metalwork of the broach, dented, but still gleaming. In the corner of his vision, pink hair

flashes. “So,” he says, giving Purpled a look, moving to sit up as the other boy shuffles to the side. They’re lined up, side-by-side on the stone wall. Birds float on thermals overhead and carriages make their way through the open palace gates, Raven’s Flight gleaming in the spring air. It’s unusually warm, and even still snow gathers on the sides of roads and drips off rooftops. Four kids, Tommy thinks absently, on a warm summer day. It’s come upon them so quickly.

There is barely any time until the solstice.

“So?” Purpled prompts.

“Got any plans tomorrow night?” Tommy asks. “After the gala cleanup?”

Purpled levels him with a deadpan look, sarcasm dripping from his tone when he responds: “Yeah, actually, I do.”

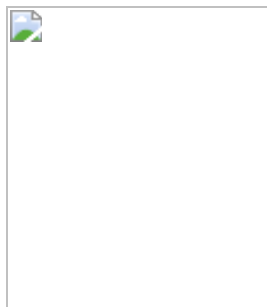
“Cool,” Tommy says, picking at his cuticles absently. “You should tell us about them later.” Ranboo and Tubbo are exchanging glances, but Purpled just sighs and then, there, the barest hint of the corner of his mouth upticking. “Tell us about all those women you get, big man.”

“I’ll have you know I get plenty of women,” Purpled says, and Tubbo cackles. “I’ll tell you later, then.”

“Cool,” Tommy says. “Bring Tubbo and Ranboo. I’m sure they want to hear.”

“You’re insane,” Ranboo says quietly, shaking his head. Then Tubbo leans over and whispers something in his ear, and his eyes go wide. “Oh! Oh. Okay!”

“You are so fuckin’ dumb,” Tommy levels with him, then hits him again, albeit lighter.



The gala happens. Tommy floats through it all, thankful for Tubbo and Ranboo’s presence—and Purpled’s, who hangs about them as well that night. It’s easy to avoid the royal family when his friends are present, their delightful group of four weaving in and out of royal guests and noble lords in order to sneak food out onto the balconies. The air is cold but Tommy is happy, in a vindictive way, because he is having fun, and somewhere in the crowds, Philza and Wilbur and the rest of them must be stressing because they’re hosting.

Tommy has not a care in the world tonight. Tonight, he lets himself be happy. Tonight, they steal truffles and hor d’oeuvres off of trays and Tommy insists Purpled stick with them, as a guest and not a worker. One last tiny point of rebellion in plain view before the real work



begins. He can feel it hanging over his head— constant, a knife to his neck pressing down at all times. Sometimes it chokes him and draws blood. Tonight he can barely feel it at all. It is warm, it is loud, it is fun.

And it ends, because all things do.

Ranboo and Tubbo have connecting guest rooms a few halls down from Tommy— he'd offered to let them stay in his room, but it's not the largest and they'd both wanted their own space. It's hours past sundown when he leaves them at their doors with a wave and a smile before turning off and heading down the cold palace halls on his own. Exhaustion creeps in at the corners of his vision; his eyes burn slightly as he goes. Purpled had disappeared before they'd even left the ballroom, and so Tommy is alone as he makes his way down familiar passageways, dragging a hand along tapestries and casting ripples in their fabric like fingers atop water. The lanterns are lowly lit, and Tommy hums to himself as he walks, footsteps echoing. However, as he turns the corner, nearly there, something catches his eye.

The door to the drawing room is open, light and voices spilling out. Tommy slows, making his footsteps quiet, and listens.

A low baritone. Technoblade's voice, and then a second later, Wilbur's. One of them laughs. Tommy slows even more, lingering just beyond the doorway and the light. He's a snoop at heart; always been nosy, always will be. So when he can finally make out words instead of just tone, he chances a glance and tips his head around the doorframe. Just enough to get a glimpse into the room, that's all. He hadn't thought Wil and Techno would've left yet, but here they are. His eyes skim over the familiar shapes of the room before landing on them. Neither one notices his skulking presence at the door.

"Pour me another glass, uncle," Wilbur is saying, his voice the kind of giddy that only comes with some level of inebriation. Tommy's seen it before on politicians and nobles alike, been to many parties where the drink has been served. He's even had a glass or sip here and there, but never enough to be affected. *Wilbur*, however, is affected.

"I'm cutting you off, crown prince," Techno drawls back. Damn. Apparently, so is he. His voice is looser than Tommy's ever heard. Softer.

"So rude," Wilbur laments. He risks a further peek inside the room— the door is wide open, lanterns lit and fire going. Techno is on the couch, booted feet propped up on the coffee table. Wilbur is sprawled on the couch with him, his head in Techno's lap, hair wild, and socked feet against the soft cushions. Their cloaks are discarded, and Wilbur's sweater is crumpled on the floor, his boots beside it. Techno's hair is undone. Wilbur holds a wine glass in one hand, the dregs of some red drink clinging to the very bottom as Techno swirls his own half-full beverage. "Almost as rude as— *hic*, oh, excuse me— almost as rude as Tommy."

Are they talking about him?

"Please," Techno rumbles. "I couldn't compete."

"Oh, my apologies," Wilbur says, lifting his free hand up into the air and gesturing wildly. "I suppose you couldn't, that child has- un- unparamounted skills of shittalking. It's quite clever,

really."

"A character trait, yeah, yeah."

"This is not a novel, Technoblade, we are not in a book." Wilbur snorts out a laugh, aborted but wild. "He isn't something you can study."

"I don't study him," Techno argues. Tommy is frozen in place watching them, eavesdropping like a tiny mouse from his spot in the hallway. How can he not? They're talking about him properly now. "I... encourage. Him. Hm."

"The wine has gotten to your head," Wilbur mutters. His gesturing hand pats Techno's cheek. "Where has your eloquence gone?"

"The same place as your ability to be quiet," Techno says, glancing down at Wilbur with an amused grin. They both laugh— Wilbur high over Techno's low, a comforting mix of sound.

"He is an enigma," Wilbur says. "We made a truce, the other day."

"Did you now?"

"Mhm. We are not friends, but we are friendly. Which is a lie, of course. I enjoy his company. I still can't believe my father chose him to go to court, though. Over— over me."

Techno's voice is quiet when he says, "You know he's doing his best."

"Tommy? Yes, of course I know he's doing his best, he's a good fuckin' actor—"

"No, Phil. Tommy's an actor?"

"He puts these— these faces on, like the masks performers wear. It's. It's interesting. Have you not noticed?"

"Hm. I suppose not."

"He puts a mask on for you too, you know. Loud, brassy, bossish. With me, he's angry. Deferential to my father, pitiful with my mother. He plays the room, Techno-blade. I'm never quite sure what to make of it." Wilbur sighs, a long stream of air blubbering out of his lips as he blows a raspberry.

"He's smart," Techno mutters. "Smart kid."

"You're drunk."

"I think I am." Techno snickers, then Wilbur giggles, and then they're both laughing again. It's not even *funny*. Tommy scowls. Adults.

"I'm so angry," Wilbur says between his laughter. Techno snorts, their amusement subsiding.

"About?" he queries.

“At. My father. *Court*,” Wilbur says, and the snarl in his voice makes it known what he is thinking about once more. Tommy winces, drawing back. Does Wilbur hate him for it? He doesn’t think so.

“You know he means well—” Techno begins, but Wilbur cuts him off with a flurry of hand movements.

“Stop telling me he means well, Techno. You and I both know he’s a coward.”

“Do not call Philza a coward, Wilbur. You know he is anything but.”

“Oh, perhaps on the battlefield he is the bravest man alive, but here? In his own home?” Wilbur sits up, and Tommy sinks back even further, frightened for a minute he’ll be seen. But Wilbur just shuffles, turning so he’s facing Technoblade with a snarl clear on his lips. “He’s a coward,” he says, reaching out to poke at Techno’s chest with one finger. “I hate him.”

“You don’t mean that,” Techno says, and his face is unreadable. It seems to frustrate Wilbur just as much as it frustrates Tommy.

“I do!” he says, throwing his arms up. Techno reaches out, takes the glass from Wilbur’s fingers, and gently sets it aside. “One day I will be the emperor, Techno. And I have no idea how to be, thanks to his— his fear, his— cowardice. I don’t even want— I don’t want—” Wilbur’s voice breaks and he sinks forward, Techno’s arm coming up around his shoulders as the older man sighs. Wilbur’s head curls up underneath his chin, and Tommy swallows as the boy’s shoulders shake. Techno looks reserved and maybe a little upset, turning his head to rest his cheek against the top of Wilbur’s hair.

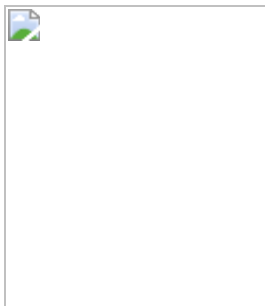
“Oh-kay,” Techno says quietly. He rubs Wilbur’s shoulders with one hand, and Tommy finally turns away, pressing his back to the cold wall of the hallway and staring into the darkness with unseeing eyes. He can still hear them inside. “Okay. Come on, Wil. I think it’s time for bed.”

“I am *so angry*, ” Wilbur says, voice wet and thick.

Tommy doesn’t stick around to hear what Techno says next, if anything at all. He slips past the doorway, cruising past the open light and warmth.

He tries not to think about Wilbur as he finally sinks into bed and attempts to fall asleep.

He fails.



“I can’t imagine he’d be the one to lie,” Tubbo says nonchalantly.

“Well, someone was lying,” Ranboo argues. “To me. About it. Connor’s always been a d– a. Hmmm.”

“Isn’t Connor the crackpot?” Dream asks, and Tubbo stifles a laugh into his gloved hands. “It’s just a rumor, I suppose.”

Tommy had been worried about introducing Dream to Tubbo and Ranboo. He hadn’t exactly been forthright when he’d told them about their plans to coup– he hadn’t told them about Dream at all, really, not until the night before this secret meeting. He’d hurriedly explained who he was to them, a brother, a mentor, guidance. A light in Tommy’s times of darkness.

“So he’s your dad,” Ranboo had said. Tommy had shaken his head, lifting his sleeve to expose his palm and show him the scar he bore there.

“No, we’re brothers,” he says. “We made a blood pact and everything when I was smaller.”

“That’s kinda fucked up,” Tubbo had commented, but he’d leaned in to look at the scar anyways, so Tommy didn’t think he meant it. He’d been nervous they wouldn’t get along– his family and his best friends– but so far, things have been going well. Not everyone is here tonight; it is notably just Dream, Tommy, Tubbo, Ranboo, Sapnap, Punz, and Karl. Karl is working on the map of the palace with Sapnap, their shoulders pressed tightly together. Punz is resting– head against the wall, eyes closed, but occasionally his face will scrunch, and Tommy knows he’s listening.

They’d explained the plans to Tubbo and Ranboo in hushed tones once introductions had been made. Tubbo had brought a kit with him, and when Dream had asked about explosives, Tubbo had nodded and began working near immediately. Conversation had flowed from there, and Ranboo is currently explaining some political shit to Dream that Tommy should be paying attention to. He’s too busy watching Tubbo tinker instead.

“He’s not a crackpot,” Ranboo says. “He’s just a little weird, I think. Nice. But weird.”

“You’re weird,” Tommy says, mostly out of instinct at this point. Tubbo whaps him on the shoulder.

“Hey,” he says. “That’s my future husband you’re talking about. Isn’t that right, sexy?” He waggles his eyebrows in Ranboo’s direction, who promptly flushes.

“Tubbo,” he hisses, with a pointed look at Dream. Dream, who just looks mildly amused. “Dude.”

“You’re an interesting pair,” Dream comments lightly, dragging his finger over the tabletop and peering at the marks Karl is making as he goes. “Tubbo, will your distractions be giving us any additional entryways into the palace?”

“About that,” Tubbo says. “I’m not adding a charge to these, actually.”

The room goes quiet. Tommy blinks. Dream is staring.

“What?” he asks, sounding tense.

“Yeah,” Tubbo says, and his voice is careful, his eyes strategically on the wiring in front of him. “I’m going to make them fireworks. They’ll still explode, but no structural damage will be done. If we put actual bombs in the places you wanted them, the whole internal integrity of the palace could be unstabilized. And if the palace collapses, there’s a significant chance there’d be a landslide. We could wipe out half of Raven’s Flight if we’re not careful.” He pauses, bringing the small box up to his eye and peering at it further. Something sparks, but he doesn’t seem to mind. “Hence, fireworks. No structural damage, and like, twice the distraction.”

The silence stretches on. Tommy glances between Tubbo and Dream— his brother’s face is sort of twisted, but when Tubbo finally looks up, locking eyes with the older man, it smoothes over.

“That should be fine,” Tommy finally pipes up. “I mean— the palace is pretty, isn’t it? We don’t want to upset more people than we’re already planning to.”

“Killing half the capital would definitely anger some people,” Ranboo says weakly. Dream presses his lips together, thin, and then nods once.

“I suppose fireworks are fine,” he says. “I’d rather we used charges, but.”

“Isn’t this Tommy’s coup?” Tubbo asks. “His decision. Tommy?”

Tommy pauses. Tubbo’s voice is challenging and he can practically see Dream bristle at the tone, but after a moment, he just swallows and looks at Tommy. Eyes hard, dark, and questioning. Disapproving, yes, but Tommy... agrees with Tubbo. He doesn’t want the palace to completely crumble.

“Fireworks,” he says. “If there’s a landslide, we could get caught in it too.”

“It could act as another avenue of excuses,” Dream says.

“So many people would die,” Tommy argues back. “No. No way. Tubbo’s right.”

Dream is still watching him. Eventually, he shrugs. “Fair enough,” he says, looking away and down at the map below him. The room is quiet— awkwardness and tension hang in the air, tangible enough to cut with scissors. Tubbo outwardly appears at ease, but Tommy notices how his fingers stutter one too many times over the wires to be completely natural. Ranboo is quiet, eyes on the floor, and Tommy can practically hear his own heartbeat in his ears. Even Karl and Sapnap have quieted. Punz is entirely still. Tommy looks down at the small box that will soon hold a firework, Tubbo’s scarred fingers twisting strands of wiring together, and swallows.

He could change the subject. He could tell them all about the conversation he overheard, the one where the prince had started crying or something like that. He could loosen the tone with a tale from a night or two ago, and get some information across to them just as well.

For some reason, though, he doesn't. Wilbur's name dies in his throat before it can even be uttered. That night had seemed private— quiet, drunk mutterings never meant to see the light of day. Something Tommy had never been meant to hear. So he keeps it to himself and moves to stand up instead, glancing over the map and shifting blueprints with one hand.

“There's a servant's entrance here,” he notes. His voice helps muddy up the tension, loosening the room. Karl marks it with the pencil clasped between painted fingernails. “Purpled will know those better than I.”

“We'll ask him,” Karl says lightly. With that, the rest of the tension drains, and the meeting carries on. Dream is quiet for a while, eyes on Tommy like brands the rest of the night. He can feel them on the back of his head, burning.

Before they leave that night, eyes drooping with exhaustion, minds full of plans and secrets, Dream stops him with a hand on his shoulder.

“We're on the same side, right?” Dream asks him. Tommy flinches, turning to frown at him.

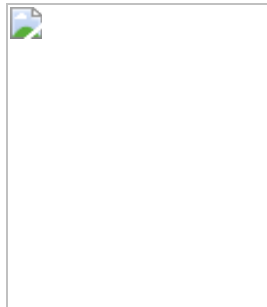
“Duh,” he says. “Obviously.”

“No, I mean—” Dream cuts himself off, runs a hand through his hair. “You and me. Our side. No one else's. Us against the world.”

Tommy stays quiet for a moment, staring up at his brother with concern etched between his brows. Dream looks harried and exhausted. Tommy's heart pangs for him. “We are,” he agrees. “Our side.”

“And once this is over, we can go home,” Dream murmurs, pulling him in for a hug. Tommy allows it— down the hall, Tubbo and Ranboo linger, waiting for him. He can see them out of the corner of his eye, the rest of his face squished against Dream's chest.

“Home,” Tommy says. Dream hugs him tighter before he lets go.



There is a week left before the solstice.

It's as though calendars taunt him with it. Everywhere he goes, Tommy is reminded of the date, banners and warm summer sun filtering through windows. The palace is planning festivities, and the town below them is also alight with a summer thrill— even if, in the north, the temperature never reaches more than mildly warm.

He can remember summer heat in the depth of the Isles like it was yesterday. Muggy, humid, sticky heat. Days spent lounging in the shade, sweat beading up on your skin and so much water in the air it was impossible to escape it. Tommy can remember the sun glinting off of the river, kids playing in the steps down to the shallows to cool off, people walking around with fans and light silks and cottons. The rank smell of fish on the docks, cool ice on your tongue from the basements. The worst heat always came right before a storm, too; he can remember the taste of electricity in the air and thinks that it is not unlike what he can taste now.

Life is electric. Tommy thinks of short-burning fuses and fireworks and tries to be normal.

It's hard, though— he starts pulling away from the royal family despite his and Wilbur's truce, despite the general being gruff but kind. The Empress seeks him out most often, but even then Tommy tries to make it hard to find him. He uses Ranboo and Tubbo as an excuse more often than not, hiding in their rooms and spending almost all of his time with them. They linger in the atrium, in the gardens that are now blooming, in the square outside the Great Hall. Tommy hides from the royal family and pretends not to notice how it bothers them. Wilbur gets even more annoying, if at all possible— he follows Tommy around like a fucking stray cat at times, soaking up his annoyed attention whenever he gets it. Philza is the only one who backs off. He even stops asking Tommy to come to morning court.

(He pretends like that doesn't sting. He knows it's because Tubbo and Ranboo are visiting. He knows, he knows, he knows—)

There is electricity in the air, and it's only a matter of time until the storm rolls in. The strange thing is, when it does happen, it surprises Tommy. He's spent his life around thunderstorms, and yet this bolt of lightning comes without warning, without so much as a whisper of what's to come.

It starts with a family dinner.

Which is stupid, of course, because it's not a family dinner. It's the royal family and Tommy. Ranboo and Tubbo are not invited to this one, apparently— in fact, Tommy is hand-delivered a small calling card with the summons on it instead of casually being asked. His Royal Highness requires your presence tonight while dining, blah blah. He stares down at the fine print and scowls.

He could just not go. But the royal family has been up his arse lately, and Tommy wants to spare them any suspicion, so he does. Dresses up in blue and white and meets Wilbur at the end of the hall, scowling as the older prince slings an arm over his shoulders.

"See you got summoned as well," Wilbur comments idly, and Tommy hums. There's an undercurrent of annoyance in Wilbur's tone. "I haven't seen you around. Lots of duties?"

"More like none at all," Tommy says, and Wilbur glances over. "I've just been with my friends. That I have. Unlike you."

"What happened to friendly?" Wilbur pouts, and Tommy snickers. It's easy to slip into bickering— too easy. He remembers Dream's face and after a moment, pulls away. Out from

under Wilbur's arm, skipping down the hall a bit.

"Friendly, not friends," Tommy says. Wilbur rolls his eyes. "How's Sally?"

"She is fine, thank you very much," Wilbur says curtly. Tommy has been getting lessons, and Sally is a pleasure— she's kind, nice to Tommy, leaves him sheet music and plays alongside him. She's a good teacher. She makes him laugh, and the piano in his room is a good source of entertainment when he's bored. Tommy has a sneaking suspicion that both he and Wilbur have been enjoying her weekly visits to the palace.

"Have you two kissed?" Tommy asks brashly, and Wilbur makes a loud embarrassed noise, reaching out with two long arms to shove Tommy. He laughs, darting away and stumbling over his own feet as Wilbur's cheeks grow red. "That's a yes! That's a yes!"

"You are despicable," Wilbur hisses, chasing him around as they approach the dining room. Tommy zig-zags, and Wilbur follows. It seems to piss him off more when he can't catch Tommy, so he makes an effort to avoid him. Laughter echoes, and Tommy delights in watching Wilbur unravel somewhat as they both skid to a stop in front of the door. The guards there eye them, but Tommy pays them no mind as he leans on his knees and breathes hard.

"You need to get out more," Wilbur tells him, patting him on the back as Tommy catches his breath.

"Oh yeah?" Tommy wheezes. "Whose fault is that?"

"Certainly not my decision," Wilbur says, and Tommy straightens up just in time to catch the nasty look on his face as he glances towards the door. "Seeing as I'm not allowed to make them at all."

Tommy chews on the inside of his cheek, then coughs.

"Well," he says. "Let's just get this over with."

"A sentiment we share," Wilbur hums. The guards reach over and open the door for them, and they head inside. The dining room is fairly lavish— it's private, two windows on one end of the room, a long table stretching in the middle made of dark, shiny wood. Candelabras and flowers (chrysanthemums, always chrysanthemums) decorate the center, and at one end of the table sit three people.

"You're late," Technoblade drawls. Tommy feels the blood drain from his face, and Wilbur stands up a bit straighter by his side.

"No, we're not," he says smoothly. "We're right on time. You're a liar, Technoblade."

"One minute over," Techno says, and he's smiling so Tommy clocks into the joke. He relaxes a bit, and his gaze flicks over to where Kristin is smiling at him. Philza is at the head of the table. They're all relaxed, drinks in hand, no food in sight yet but some small appetizers spread out before them.



“Unimportant,” Wilbur says, then steps forward to take his seat beside Techno. Kristin gestures to the seat beside her, and so that’s where Tommy ends up.

It’s quiet.

Usually, Tommy would expect Wilbur to fill the silence. Or himself, if he’s being honest. But he’s focusing on acting normal, on making himself seem totally inconspicuous, so he’s quiet. Food is brought out, and finally someone breaks the silence—servants filter in and out, and Technoblade absently says something that Kristin replies to. The words hang in the air.

Prime, it’s fucking awkward. Tommy sends up a quick prayer. When he glances over at Wilbur, the other boy is staring at his plate, mouth shut, eyes cast downward.

“So,” Philza says. “Tommy. How are Tubbo and Ranboo?”

“They’re alright,” he says truthfully. Tubbo has been working on firework bombs. Ranboo has been working out diplomatic plans to bring to Libra’s council. Totally fine and normal. “Thank you for letting them stay.”

“They’re always welcome, dear,” Kristin says with a smile. “I’m sure it’s nice to see them again. You three are so close!”

“It’s nice,” Tommy says. He doesn’t elaborate, and silence falls between them all again. The ambient sounds of silverware on ceramic screeches like sirens through his ears, and Technoblade takes a drink, long and gulping. Tommy eyes him. Technoblade eyes him back.

“You better not kick me,” he says. Tommy scoffs.

“I’m not an ass,” he says. “Literally or figuratively.” Wilbur snorts. Okay, that’s good.

Tommy just wants this dinner to be over with, already.

“How has tutoring been going?” Philza asks next. Wilbur snorts, again, and all eyes at the table fall on him.

“You would know,” Wilbur begins slowly, “that Tommy hasn’t really been going to tutoring. You know, if you paid attention.”

“Wilbur,” Kristin says.

“Don’t fuckin’ snitch,” Tommy scowls from across the way. Wilbur just looks up at him, eyes dark, and then flicks his vindictive stare to his father.

“He’s not paying attention,” Wilbur says. “Might as well tell the truth.”

Philza sighs, and sets down his fork. “Wil, can we not—”

“Can we not what?” Wilbur snaps. “Not talk about it? That’s what you always do, Dad. Avoid the problem and move on with your life. Not a very healthy theme you’ve got going on.”

Philza sighs again, and Tommy sinks back in his seat, looking between Wilbur and Phil as though they're playing an engaging game of tennis. "Wilbur," he says more sternly. "Not right now. After dinner."

"Not right now, not ever. You'll just find some fucking excuse. I'm sick of your shit." Wilbur's rage is all-encompassing and fiery. He moves to stand, shoving his chair back and scraping it along the floor. Technoblade half-rises, a hand ready to steady him, but Wilbur slaps him away. "Don't fucking touch me!"

"Wilbur, please," Kristin says gently. His eyes soften on her, but not by much. "I know things have been busy lately—"

"Lately?" Wilbur scoffs. "You mean for the past six years? Seven years? My whole life?"

"Wilbur, I am right here," Philza says.

"No," Wilbur says. "That is *not* what I mean. You don't get to pretend I don't exist and try this now. You brought—" his voice cracks some, and he gestures across the table to Tommy with one hand. Tommy sinks back further, trying his best to melt into the furniture. "You brought him with you to court. You have never once asked me. What does that say about what you think of me? Am I incompetent? Do you wish he was your son instead of me? Is that it?"

"*Hey*," Tommy says, bristling, because he is not Philza's son (memories of a razor, scraping like thin wire across his face) and never will be. But Wilbur ignores him and marches onward, voice rising in pitch and volume as he continues.

"Do you hate me?" he asks, leaning forward over the dishes of food growing cold. Philza sits there and stares at him. "Do you wish I'd never been born? Is that it? Admit it, Dad, you *hate* me—"

"That is not true!" More chairs scraping across the floor, and Philza is standing now, a fist slamming against the table so hard the dishware clatters and the water in Tommy's glass shakes. He so badly wants to turn tail and run— but he can't. Not when there is a standoff happening between him and the door.

A foot links around his own ankle, soft skirts brushing against his leg. Kristin's hand gently finds his own just under the table, and squeezes.

"I don't hate you," Philza says, and his voice breaks. "Wil, I could never hate you."

"Then *why* do you fucking act like it?" Wilbur snarls. Philza stands there, staring, and then swallows.

"I'm so scared of losing you," he says. "Do you know? Do you know, Wilbur, what it's like? To sit there and watch my son die through a glass? Do you know what it's like to not know if he'll live through the night? To watch my citizens die to things I can't stop or fix?" He swallows again, and shifts, standing more upright. "Wilbur, everything I have ever done, it has always been for you."

“Then why do you push me aside,” Wilbur pleads, leaning forward, begging. “Why don’t you let me help?”

“Wil—” Phil, finally Phil, spreads his fingers flat against the table. “You are the best parts of me,” he says, voice breaking slightly. “And I don’t want to ruin that. Ruin you. Look at what I’ve done and tell me I am someone to look up to.” His eyes, for a moment, flash to Tommy. “Everything I’ve ever done has been to keep you safe and happy and well-fed. Wil, I love you. I could never hate you.”

“Then let me help,” Wilbur asks. He takes a moment, raises an arm to wipe at his eyes, gestures pleading. “Dad, I just want to help. I’m not six anymore. When the people need an emperor one day, and I can’t rise to that, what will happen? Depriving me now isn’t saving our future. It’s not even close. It’s destroying it.”

“Wil, I’d let this city burn to the ground if it meant you were safe,” Phil admits quietly. Tommy blinks. “You’re my son.”

Finally, Kristin speaks up. “Why don’t we take this conversation elsewhere?” she prompts gently, letting go of Tommy’s hand as she moves to stand. She looks at him purposefully— he should go, but he’s frozen in his seat as both Wilbur and Phil glance over. They stand there for a second, caught in the middle of this argument (one Tommy thinks has been a long time brewing. There is no jealousy in his own gut when Phil calls Wilbur his son. No jealousy at all. Letting a city burn for someone? Stupid. Any king knows to put his people first.

And yet.)

“Sorry,” Phil says, to him and to... everyone, Tommy thinks. Wilbur is quiet. Technoblade is next to move, gently pushing out of his seat and making his way over to Tommy’s side of the table. He stands there as Phil turns and brings a hand to his head, Wilbur watching with hooded eyes as he moves to leave the room. Then, he follows. Kristin goes next.

Techno and Tommy are left alone. Dinner is spread before them, unappetizing. Techno’s hand is warm on his shoulder, and Tommy doesn’t let himself think at all for fear of his mind betraying him.

“Why don’t you go to bed?” Techno finally says, breaking the soft quiet of the room.

“Yeah,” Tommy says, swallowing dryly. Techno pats his shoulder once, and that’s that.

It’s not, though. Later, when Tommy hears footsteps moving stealthily past his room, some unknown calling makes him want to follow. So he does.

He finds him on a roof, of all places.

Wilbur is sitting out in the cold, blustering mountain air. The window had been open, letting in the cold breeze, and from it, if you climbed onto the ledge right, you could hop right onto the roof. Wilbur has a cloak drawn around him, the hood pulled up to his cheeks, his eyes

hooded and nearly shut in the darkness when Tommy crawls out beside him and staunchly refuses to look down. They are *very* high up. Below them, though, beyond immediate death, Raven's Flight stretches into the canyon. It's pretty, even at night. Above them, stars speckle the sky like tiny dots of paint.

"Did you talk to him?" Tommy breaks the silence first. There are tear tracks down Wilbur's face, and Tommy's not sure if they're from the constant buffets of wind or from before. The conversation had surely continued—Tommy's not sure what to expect, is the thing.

"Sure," Wilbur says. "Yeah. Yeah, I did." Something about his tone is lighter. Not as angry.

"And...?" He's not sure why he's asking. But Wilbur just sighs.

"Not your business," he says, but it's not unkind, and it's not a push for solitude. So Tommy stays.

"Do you know the constellations?" he asks instead, and Wilbur hums.

"Some of them."

"I do. I like star charts."

"I recall you had a fondness for them, yes. And something about making wishes on stars?"

"Yeah, that's how we'd make wishes back home. On the stars. They led us here, you know. Way back before any kingdoms were made, and it was just... people on boats." Tommy stares up at the sky, and points. There's the Lady Prime, her head bowed in piety. "She guided us here, with her bright star in her palms. To the Continent."

"I know that one," Wilbur murmurs. Tommy nods.

"I wish they could guide us now," he says, tucking his chin into his knees, his chest. Wilbur rumbles with laughter. "*What?*"

"You're such a little kid," Wilbur teases, finally looking over at him with a glint in his eye. "Wanting to wish on stars? Little child. Gremlin kid. Such a *baby*."

"Fuck you," Tommy spits. "I am not a child."

"You certainly act like one sometimes."

"Someone has to balance your osta—ostenv—"

"Ostentatiousness?"

"That's the one. Fuck you! Bitch."

"Your vocabulary astounds me every day." Wilbur laughs, and Tommy giggles too, because it's funny, okay? He likes the looks on people's faces when he swears. That's half the reason he does it.

"I like it when people underestimate me," Tommy boasts. "Then when I reveal how much smarter I am than they are, they are immediately humbled. Because I am a humbling man."

"You are not," Wilbur says, and snickers. "I'll be seeing your skills tomorrow morning, though. I guess you could prove it then."

"I'll be in court? *You'll* be in court?" Tommy asks lightly, and Wilbur nods. Something *has* been sorted out, then. Interesting.

(It hits Tommy, for a brief moment, how insignificant this is. This fight, all of it— it will not matter in a week's time. Because in a week's time, the royal family will all be dead, and Tommy will not have to think about them anymore.

There is minimal comfort in the thought. There is even less comfort in that realization.)

"I will," Wilbur nods. "My father has given in."

"I'm not about to step back and let you shine," Tommy warns. "I like fucking with people and giving orders."

"Be honest with me," Wilbur says, and Tommy snorts. "Were you happy? As king of the Isles?"

"Yes," Tommy says truthfully. "It was all I ever knew. Now that I'm not... it, I'm— lost."

They fall into silence. Wilbur hums.

"When I was younger," he says. "I got sick.

"It was the Red Cough. My mother figured it out first— she quarantined with me, since she'd already been exposed. I got so, so sick. I don't remember most of it— I remember some of the early treatments, the bloodletting, how they'd drag the magic out of me. It felt like my head was constantly stuffed with strips of cotton, and when the buildup got too bad, it felt like... like my head was about to explode. Then I got even sicker and I don't remember... getting better. I just remember waking up, not dead. My hands, they'd— when they treat the Red Cough, they try and force out the excess magic somewhere that'll cause the least damage. The hands and feet are most common." Wilbur looks down, and then gently, finger by finger, tugs off his gloves. The scars that envelop his hands are thick and deep, red and angry where they're not pale and ghostly. Tommy stares. He's never seen them so close, so openly before. Wilbur just turns his hands over, showing him his palms.

"My mother chose my ability to walk over my ability to strum a guitar or write," he says.

"When I woke up, my hands were so destroyed that I had to relearn everything— I had to relearn how to hold a fork, a pen. I could hardly walk, either. By the time I started feeling normal again, my father had just declared war." Wilbur goes quiet. "I don't think I've spent time with him since I got sick, honestly. He wasn't allowed to see me for six *months* due to the quarantine. After that, he was..." Wil's eyes catch the stars, like deep, endless nets.

"Busy."

Tommy stays quiet. There is an eternity of something between them.

"I know what it's like to feel lost," he says as the silence echoes. "That's what I— that's what I've been trying to tell you. I know what it feels like to lose everything, even your autonomy." Wilbur holds his hands up, smiling faintly. "It took me years to relearn how to play the guitar. Even now, I'm not as good as I could've been if I hadn't gotten sick. So. Yeah. I know what it's like."

Wilbur knows what it's like to drown. To suffocate. To choke on your own self and weep for what could've been, to never truly regain what was lost. Tommy stares at him and his fingers, and then down at his own chest with blind, open eyes. Something resonates in him with Wilbur, and it frightens him. It frightens him really, truly, how much he feels and understands what Wilbur is trying to do here.

"I'm sorry I treated you poorly," Wilbur says gently. Tommy swallows. "When you first arrived. And later. I've just been so angry. I don't mean to make you pull away."

"I know," Tommy says, because he's not sure what else to say. His chest is tight, uncomfortable. Wilbur's actions have nothing to do with why he's distancing himself— it's necessary. And yet. "I've been angry too."

"Understandable," Wilbur murmurs. He starts to tug his gloves back on, fighting off the inherent chill of the wind. "I wouldn't blame you if you never forgave us. I don't think we deserve it."

Tommy stays quiet. So does Wilbur. After only a moment, Tommy is shoving himself to his feet, head whirling so fiercely he nearly stumbles and falls to his death off the tiles. But he catches himself last minute, and without another word to Wilbur, clambers back through the window and into the palace.



## Chapter End Notes

ART FOR THIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#) AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

-

rising tension... not long left, now.

if you want to support ukraine, please remember to get your sources from verified news and journalists. no to war!

-

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or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

# arc V. - felled in the night, by the ones you think you love

## Chapter Summary

twc: n/a

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur joins them in court.

Philza asks Tommy to join him, as well. That's not a surprise— Tommy wakes up early and heads to the Great Hall, greets the advisors and nobles, and stands in his usual spot. On the other side, though, Wilbur lingers. And now Tommy is not the only one Phil turns to for advice.

Every time he sees Phil's head duck to the side and Wilbur mutter something in return, Tommy wonders what they said in those private rooms in order to garner such peace between them. There is still a hint of lingering anger in Wilbur's eyes, mostly coming to the surface whenever Philza disregards his guidance, but Tommy thinks Wilbur starts to understand. Court isn't just a mark of favor; it's an exercise in trust, and a learning experience. Wilbur takes a little while to settle into his role, but he does so sooner than later. Tommy thinks of the tear tracks on his cheeks that night on the roof, and then throws himself into politics for the morning.

Wilbur is clever. That much is evident. Phil often takes his advice, just as he does with Tommy's. Wilbur is charismatic, too. After the initial round of morning advice, they mingle with courtiers and nobles alike, and Tommy keeps his eye on Wilbur as he catches up with one of the advisors— an older man, a landholder of wineries in Libra and on the Empire border. Wilbur makes the ladies laugh and the men smile, and he's... well.

This isn't a good look for their plan. Wilbur is supposed to be rejecting his role, but here he is, fulfilling it with a smile and an ease that comes with being raised for the job. Tommy chews on the inside of his cheek. It'll be fine. There's clearly some tension between Wilbur and Phil still, a look in both their eyes that's hard to shake. Wilbur shies from his hand when the emperor welcomes his son back onto the dais for the second round of petitioners, and Philza is left with his fingers hovering in the air before dropping absently.

Tommy lets him ruffle his hair. His hand is warm.

The morning passes, and by the time Tubbo and Ranboo slip into the Great Hall, Tommy is done with listening to people drivel on. Phil gives him a look when he starts to impatiently tap his feet, and then finally, finally they're all dismissed. He's quick to dart over to where his



friends are, leaving Wilbur and Phil behind. He misses the fond looks he gets from both of them, the way even the nobles watch him go and smile as he nearly crashes into the two.

“It’s such bullshit,” Tommy complains mildly. “The whole argument. I swear it’s been on for two fucking weeks at this point. People in the Isles were never this stubborn.”

“You are,” Ranboo says. Tommy shoots him a look. “What! I’m being honest!”

“Fuck off,” Tommy says, and he moves to elbow him.

Mornings are early, and nights are late.

Purpled shows up at midnight nearly every night now. They haven’t been caught yet, no suspicious looks or anything even when Tommy falls asleep at the breakfast table. There’s only a week left. Less, now. Six days.

Five.

Four.

The days tick over to three remaining when Tommy is deep below the palace, lit by candlelight and maps strewn about. Purpled is beside him, Tubbo working on charges in a makeshift desk across the room. It’s a packed house tonight– everyone is here, waiting. Pacing. The tension in the room is palpable, and Tommy is in the center of it all. Dream is too, hands braced on either side of a map of the palace as he converses with Sapnap in low tones.

“Here,” he says, pointing. “We’ll take the east in, and you take the west. Tommy and I’ll be in the Great Hall– that’s the emergency plan, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Karl pipes up. “Evacuate down to the Great Hall, the royal guard is posted outside while His Majesty gives orders.”

“We’ll want to intercept the general,” Dream hums. “George?”

“I can do it,” George says flatly. “Which hall?”

“This one,” Dream points. “Plenty of windows. Got a bow?”

“Always,” George hums. Tommy swallows. Across the room, Eret’s hands shift, carving tiny flecks of metal out of the blade of a sword and imbuing it with magic. Tommy can practically taste the sharpness on his tongue.

“And we’ll be here, heading inside to meet the Emperor and Empress. Purpled will be dealing with the prince. The fireworks will go off at midnight. Right?” The question is thrown across the room.

“The fireworks will go off at midnight,” Tubbo parrots. Ranboo swings his feet, kicking the wood below them with a dull thump.

“That’s a plan,” Dream says, leaning back. Tommy glances up, meets his gaze. “Is that a plan?”

“...” Tommy hesitates. Dream frowns, and he takes a breath, shuts his eyes, and then opens them again. He fixes him in his gaze, and Tommy gently nods. “It’s a plan,” he agrees.

They have a plan.

That morning, Tommy sleeps in. No one comes to call him to court, and he’s allowed a couple hours more respite. He’s grateful for it– the stress is weighing on him, and he knows the royal family can see it. They obviously have no idea what he’s planning (they don’t, they can’t, they *can’t* –) but they can see the bags under his eyes and know he’s not getting enough sleep. And so Tommy is not particularly surprised when he wakes up with the sun creeping onto his face, warming his hair and pillow and half the morning wasted away already. He takes the morning slowly; washes his face with cold water, pokes at the fire in his room himself. Breakfast is brought on a tray with tea, and he takes it by himself, once again dragging his chair over to the window and staring out at the clouds as he relaxes.

It’s nice. It’s a slow, easy morning. Eventually Tommy knows he must make an appearance somewhere, but for now it’s easy to just watch the sun climb higher and higher into the sky, a honey-slow morning coated in thin layers of gold.

The hallways are empty. Most people are in court, and the only folks he sees are servants or guards. A couple of the servants nod his way, and he finds himself nodding back, a skip in his step as he makes his way down the halls. Wilbur and Phil are busy, he knows. He could go to the atrium, try and find Techno. That would be nice, they haven’t sparred in a while– but as he’s debating his next steps, he passes by the drawing room and lingers. The door is cracked open, and inside, he can hear the soft sounds of music.

In a pantomime of his eavesdropping a few nights ago, Tommy gently tips his head into the room and peers around. There’s a small instrument in the corner– a harpsichord, one Tommy has never properly played because the spacing is too different for him to get used to compared to the piano in his room. Kristin is sitting on the bench, hands poised elegantly over the keys with her dark hair tumbling in curls down her back. It’s pinned up with an elegant emerald pin, keeping strands out of her face, and her skirts drape across her lap and onto the floor. She’s got a shawl around her shoulders, woven with cords of brilliant blue. She’s playing, absently plucking at keys as she sits there.

Tommy listens for a little while, pressing his head against the doorframe and staying silent. It’s eventual that he’s caught, but for now, he just listens. There’s a simple melody she keeps playing over and over, as though caught in a loop, occasionally darting out and adding onto or taking away from it on a whim. Tommy thinks absently that a fondness for music must run in the family– he knows of Wilbur’s own affinity for composition, and clearly he got it from somewhere. At some point he ends up inside the room, sprawled out along the couch and listening as he stares up at the metal-panel ceiling. Based on how she tips her head, the Empress clearly knows he’s there. But she doesn’t comment, not until she finishes playing,

lifting her hands from the keyboard and letting them sit delicately in her lap. She turns, hair shuffling and eyes landing on him, crinkling as she smiles.

“Good morning,” she says.

“Ow do,” Tommy says back, tearing his eyes from the ceiling to meet her gaze. She smiles wider, and Tommy feels the worst pang of guilt yet. He shoves it down, swallowing hard. “You play nice.”

“It’s just a silly ditty,” Kristin says, rolling her eyes lightly and moving to get up. She pushes the bench back and with her skirts shuffling, makes her way over to the couch. Tommy moves his feet in order for her to sit, and she does. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine enough,” Tommy lies. “You?”

“Like a rock!” Kristin hums, and she smiles at him as he hesitantly— slowly, carefully— puts his feet down by her lap. “I convinced Phil to let you sleep in, you know. You looked like you needed it.”

“Mm,” Tommy hums, noncommittal, and then shrugs. “I guess.”

“Is...” Kristin pauses. “Is everything alright?”

Tommy does not say what he is thinking out loud. Prime, no.

“Yeah,” he says. “I think with summer coming back, I just... miss home.”

“What about home do you miss?” she asks, and he blinks, glancing up at the ceiling once more. It had been a lie to get her off his back about losing sleep, so he didn’t have to think about the coup and the plans to have her dead on the floor by the end of the week, but— he hadn’t really been lying, had he? He does miss his home. With any luck, he’ll be back there soon.

“The sun,” he says. “It’s cloudy here. And I miss— the river. I miss the seaside. We would go to a summer palace, sometimes, one that was right down the river. Take the boat.”

“That sounds lovely,” Kristin says. Tommy nods.

“It was,” he says, resolute in that fact. “It was awesome. There was ocean and boats and sand. And the summer palace was small, but it was nice. The best part was this huge open hallway, with columns and marble floors and these curtains that hung over the big open windows. And on the other wall, it was— there were— pictures. Of my parents. I would sit there for hours.” Tommy blinks. “I hope they’re still there.”

He has no idea what happened to the summer palace in the wake of his kidnapping, or even the normal palace. Hopefully they haven’t been destroyed; he doesn’t think so, but he also knows better than to imagine everything will be just as he left it.

“Portraits?” Kristin asks. Tommy nods.

"Of the old king and my mom," he explains. "Back before I was born." None of those portraits had included Dream— they never did. Dream was a tiny secret, he had explained. A family treasure, a bastard that was cherished by the court and locals alike. The king had been assassinated before he could officially adopt Dream, the older boy had said, but there had been plans to do so. He is Tommy's brother regardless. He loves him like one, even if their places as king and advisor aren't what they would've been. Tommy knows that's why Dream hides. He needs to keep his face hidden, work from the shadows, be the lurking doom behind Tommy's own ruling fist. Dream is his secret weapon. He'd heard so many stories about his parents from Dream, all about their kindness and open, bleeding hearts. He looks over at Kristin as he sits there, and he watches her face twist for a moment. When she meets his gaze in return, he tips his head in questioning.

Kristin's eyes are somewhat distant as she turns and stares out across the room. "I knew your mother once," she admits.

"What?" he breathes. That's... not what he had been expecting.

"We were both queens," Kristin points out, her head tipping downwards somewhat, a smile creeping across her face. "Both young women just married, both aiming for children, in love. We got along quite well. The last time I saw her was when she was pregnant with you."

"Me?" Tommy asks. She nods.

"We walked in the gardens together," she says. "That was only a few months before the Cataclysm." The reminder of her death, his birth, the day the world shook sobers his thoughts. Tommy takes a breath.

"What was she like?" he asks, barely a whisper. Kristin smiles wider then.

"Funny," she says, nodding, still gazing across the room like the memories are consuming her, dancing in the spaces between the curtains. "She was always so funny. Kind. She knew the struggles I was facing and offered advice. She could quiet a room in a second just by standing up and gazing across it. And stubborn as a mule, beyond that. She was a good woman, your mother. Some days, I look at you, and all I can see is her." Kristin's face turns, smiling slightly. "You really look so much like her," she says, patting Tommy's cheek. "Although, I'm not sure where these came from." Her hand moves up, twirling one of Tommy's curls on her finger. "Your parents both had dark hair. A little drop of sunshine for them, I suppose." She goes quiet. "I miss her," Kristin admits. "All these years later, and that loss still feels raw."

"I didn't know you were friends," Tommy mutters, picking absently with his thumb at his cuticle.

"She was so excited when Wilbur was born," Kristin says, and her hand passes over his head once more. "I have some of her letters even now."

"Oh," Tommy says. There's nothing else to say to that.

What would his mother think of their plot, he wonders. Would she have been angry too, at this betrayal by a friend? Or would she have been forgiving?

“I never knew her,” he says. “There were hardly any portraits outside the summer palace.”

“I have a locket portrait of her, I think,” Kristin says. Tommy blinks and looks at her— she is looking back, a sad, soft smile on her face. “I could find it and give it to you, if you want.”

“Oh, no, that’s—”

“It’s not an issue, Tommy. She was your mother.”

“But I didn’t even know her,” he says, and his voice cracks. Fuck. He reaches up and finds his cheeks suspiciously wet. There’s an unnamable emotion rising in his chest, a horrible type of hurt that he doesn’t think he could even begin to describe. It is fish, belly-up and dead in the harbor. A blight upon the crops, the dread that animals feel before an earthquake. Regret, most of all. And just plain old longing— Tommy longs for her, misses her, wishes he got to know her. He wishes he had a portrait locket of her to keep, one that she’d given him when he was young instead of having to inherit it from Kristin.

He wants his mom. Achingly, desperately so.

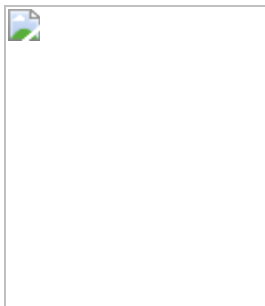
“Oh, sweetheart,” Kristin says, and then there are open arms and he falls into them without restraint, because fuck it. Everything feels so horrible— there is guilt there, festering like an open wound. Regret and uncertainty, and above all, he just *wants his mom*. He’s a kid. There shouldn’t be this much stress on his shoulders, but there is, and he feels like he’s been keeping the sky up on his own for far, far too long. Kristin’s hands are warm as they surround him and he buries his face in her chest, the smell of vanilla and cardamom tugging at his brain. Tears stream down his face, his nose clogged, throat thick.

He sobs, openly.

(He thinks it’s the first time he’s truly cried since the end of the war.)

“You’re okay,” Kristin murmurs, one hand coming up to cup his head and pet his hair back. Tommy presses harder into her touch as his body trembles. “Let it out, it’s alright.” He chokes on a wail, and she holds him tighter, and he pretends for a second. Cries, because he can.

She rocks him back and forth until he’s done, exhausted.



It is dark, and it is cold, and Tommy is having doubts.

“You said it was a plan,” Dream says, tapping his fingers.

“Yeah, I know,” Tommy says, tapping his own fingers in turn. “But there’s an island. Cormorant. With the right amount of guards and people, we can keep it under control. It’ll be easy to make a prison— they wanted to send *me* there. Isn’t that kind of good? A twist of irony?”

“The Empress isn’t helpless, Tommy,” Eret says gently. They’ve been working on runes for ages, their fingers red and the armor for their troops enchanted. Glimmering in the corner.

“I’m not saying she is!” he says in return. “I just— she doesn’t deserve this. She wasn’t a part of it.”

“Bullshit,” Dream calls. “She was nice to you, what, once?”

“More than once,” Tommy argues. “Many times. She’s a— a good lady. I just think we have other options—”

“Tommy, are you on our side or not?” Dream snaps, whipping his head around to face him. “You need to stop questioning this shit. I’m serious.”

“But Dream—”

“No! No fucking buts! Tommy, you’re either all in, or you’re out. Being in means killing the Empress. And if you’re *out*, that means this entire thing goes down. Everything we’ve been working on goes down the drain. Is that what you want? Are you seriously fucking doing this to me now? We are so close.”

“I just—”

“You what? You’re not thinking, is what you’re doing. Tommy, you need to decide. Pick a side,” Dream snarls, face curling into a sneer. “Remember what they did to you. To us. They tore down our life and took you away. They humiliated you. Do you know that I saw you? On the way out of the city? I saw you on the horse with your hands tied like a fucking animal. That’s what they think of you, Tommy. You’re nothing more than a dog to them. Some pretty bird they can show off to their citizens.” Dream gets closer, in Tommy’s face, and he can feel the wet, hot air of his breath on his nose. “You’re just a war prize to them, Tommy. Proof of their victory. They don’t love you. They don’t even like you. *She* doesn’t like you.”

“You’re not there,” Tommy whispers. “You’re not there. You don’t see—”

“I see them smiling and waving on their stupid fucking horses,” Dream grits out. “And I see you, dressed in blue—” His hand comes up, tugging on Tommy’s collar and gathering the material so tight it nearly chokes him. “—paraded around. When you turn your back, all they do is look at you like vultures. That’s all they are. They want the power you represent. But do you want to know something about power, Tommy?”

All eyes in the room are on them. Tommy swallows, but before he can nod or respond, Dream keeps going.

“Power,” he says, letting go of his shirt collar and turning around, Tommy pretending like he’s not gasping for air behind him. He spreads his arms wide, challenging anyone else in the room to step forward. Tommy meets Tubbo’s gaze from across the way, the other boy’s eyes narrowed and calculating. “Power,” Dream says. “Doesn’t come to the fastest, or the strongest. It doesn’t just *happen* to people who are good with swords or words. Power comes to those who are willing to do anything to achieve it. I’m willing. Are you?” He looks over at Punz, who has been watching. The man slowly, hesitantly, nods. Dream turns to George and Sapnap. “Are you?” They nod in turn. Around the room he goes, asking, asking, and finally Dream turns right back around to Tommy.

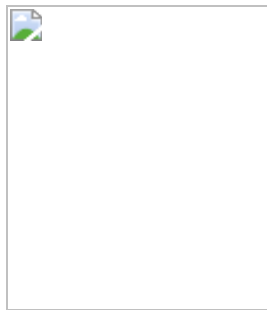
“Well?” he prompts. “What are you willing to do to get back what’s rightfully yours, Tommy?”

Tommy’s mouth is dry, but he licks his lips and opens it anyways: “Anything.”

Dream smiles, a viper getting ready to strike, and leans down. He gathers Tommy up in a hug, wrapping his arms around his shoulders as their hearts beat in tandem, as one. Dream is his, Tommy thinks quietly, in all his brilliance. And Tommy is Dream’s. “That’s all I needed to hear,” he says. And then, quieter, “I’ll do this with or without you. Are you in?”

Tommy nods, pressing his mouth to Dream’s warm shoulder and shutting his eyes.

“I’m in,” he says. He can’t tell if he’s lying or not.



“We need to talk,” Tubbo says. Tommy’s blood runs cold. Those are never good words to hear.

“‘Bout?” he asks, turning three-quarters in order to see his friend in the dim light of the hall.

“Things,” Tubbo says, and he’s got That Face on. Eyebrows scrunched together, a displeased pout on his lips as he stares at Tommy and makes his displeasure known. It’s late— Tommy’s spent the day in court and then sneaking off with Tubbo and Ranboo and Purpled to the interior of the palace (they aren’t questioned whenever they disappear together. The royal family is strangely trusting. Kristin even encourages it.) “We should talk about it in my room, though.”

“Somewhere private,” Tommy says, understanding, and Ranboo is beside Tubbo as they all head into Tubbo’s room, the door slamming shut decisively as they stand there. Tommy glances between their faces, the anxious wringing of Ranboo’s hands as he curls in on himself, and the way Tubbo keeps his anger cold and fierce. “Who pissed you off?” he finally asks. He’s still coming off the adrenaline from earlier, Dream’s little speech infectious. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah, something happened,” Tubbo snaps. Tommy reels back as though he’s been physically struck at the vitriol in his voice. “Dream’s fucking nuts.”

“I– okay, haha, yeah,” Tommy says, and Ranboo turns away, hiding by the window as Tubbo stays right where he is, steadfast. “Yeah, he’s a little nuts, but without that crazy we’d never be doing this, so...”

“Exactly,” Tubbo says. “Exactly, Tommy! Why are you doing this? It doesn’t– what Dream said, he was lying to you.”

“Dream wouldn’t lie to me,” Tommy says immediately, defensive. “Tubbo, what the fuck are you saying?”

“He is!” Tubbo says, throwing an arm out wide. “Tommy, he is lying to you! I just watched him do it!”

“Dream doesn’t lie to me,” Tommy says, although he knows it’s a lie in itself. He amends it: “He doesn’t lie to me about shit like this. Dream and I– we’re brothers, Tubbo. You don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand?” Tubbo asks, sounding exasperated and astounded all at once. Tommy takes a careful step back.

“You don’t,” he insists. “This– this is good for me. The stuff Dream said, about power, about doing anything to achieve it– it’s good. He’s right. Being king was what made me happy. Being king is what I’m meant to do.”

“What about the royal family?” Tubbo asks, and it’s like he’s sent a javelin into Tommy’s heart from across the room. “They believe the same, do they deserve to die for it?”

“Phil started an unjust war,” Tommy argues.

“And since when has he just been Phil to you?” Tubbo fires back. Tommy stammers, lost for words until finally Ranboo offers respite and steps back into the ring, placing a hand on Tubbo’s shoulder.

“Tubbo,” he says, gentle and low.

“Don’t you start,” Tubbo snaps, turning to look up at him. “You *know* it’s bullshit. All of this– it’s bullshit. You know Libra will never agree to this stupid fucking plan. I don’t understand why you can’t see this, Tommy. You’re joking.”



“Dream has never let me down,” Tommy says. “Not once in my life. Never. Ever. I trust him more than I trust *you*. More than I trust myself! You don’t get it! You don’t understand. Dream is my— he’s my best friend. He raised me. He helped me be the best person I could be. Why wouldn’t I trust him?”

“Because he’s lying!” Tubbo nearly shouts. Ranboo winces, glancing towards the door and despite their anger, they both lower their voices.

“He is not,” Tommy retorts hotly. “Tubbo, can’t you see how fucking miserable I am? Once this is all over I’ll be able to be happy again. I am so fucking scared this won’t— that this won’t work. But it has to, it will, it has to. Without it, without Dream, I will *never* be happy again.”

“I just don’t think that’s true,” Tubbo says. Tommy watches his face twist and shift, a terrible sort of determination settling on his features as he stands there, fists tight at his sides and eyes dull. “I could tell them.”

The whole world stops. Even Ranboo goes entirely still.

“You wouldn’t,” Tommy breathes.

“I would,” Tubbo says quietly. Tommy takes one step forward, and then another.

“If you tell,” he says softly, “then you’re picking a side that isn’t mine. Tubbo, don’t. You want me to be miserable?” Pleading, begging. “Don’t tell. Don’t tell. They’ll kill me.”

Tubbo’s face screws up. “What is he saying to you? Why do you listen to him unquestionably? Tommy you’re king, not him.” His tone turns pleading. “I don’t *want* to tell, I don’t, but he’s hiding something. There’s something he’s not telling you. Why can’t you fucking see it?”

“You don’t know anything,” Tommy says. “I don’t know everything, sure, but I know what’s important. I can’t fucking doubt him right now, not when we’re so close.”

“And the royal family?” Tubbo questions again. “Do they deserve this?”

“They deserve something!” Tommy says, and his voice is rising, anger and frustration clouding his mind. Tubbo is pushing points he doesn’t want to think about, things he doesn’t want to admit and he knows it, but he also knows that if he just makes it through this it’ll be okay. It has to be. “Does that make you think differently of me? Am I not who you thought I was? Newsflash, Tubbo, here I am. Get used to it. Sometimes kings have to do terrible things.”

“Tommy, I don’t trust him,” Tubbo continues to plead. He’s still impassive, but his voice shakes just slightly as he speaks. “I’m scared for you. If something happens and we get caught, you’ll be ruined.”

“Who cares?” Tommy asks, because in the end, who does? Not him, certainly. “It’s my life to ruin. And it’ll have been worth it, even if it fails. It’s not your fucking business. If you’re not

in, then you're not in." Betrayal, cold and desperate, but oh-so-achingly familiar at this point. Tubbo steps back as Tommy advances, stumbling feet as his voice rises and rises until he's shouting. "I didn't need you. I wanted you on my side, sure, but I didn't need you. I shouldn't have trusted you, since you're just holding that over my head now too. Dream was right— Dream was right! If you're out, you're out. Leave me alone, and let us do this. Leave *us* alone. We don't need you." And then, in a bitter spat of anger: "I *hate* you. I hate you!"

Ranboo audibly swallows in the silence that follows, Tubbo stubbornly staring up at Tommy's chin with a glare and unshed tears glimmering in his eyes. He's clearly scrabbling for control and fighting a losing battle as Tommy glares down at him, too angry to feel anything but caustic vengeance and a sick sort of satisfaction at the look on his face.

"If that's how you feel," Tubbo says, throat choked up. "Then get out my fucking room."

"With pleasure," Tommy snaps. He turns on his heel, and there's a sound from Ranboo, a call of Tommy's name, but he ignores it and storms outside into the hall.

"Tommy!" Ranboo says again, skidding around the corner, his eyes wide and frantic. Tommy whirls, his anger not yet quelled, and glares at him. The taller kid stops in his tracks, hanging off of the door frame with one hand and blinking like a deer on the edge of a forest.

"Unless you're here to tell me you're on my side," Tommy snarls, "I don't want to hear it. Fuck off."

He hopes, for a moment. Wishes, prays, watches.

Ranboo opens his mouth, and then shuts it. He lets go of the frame, hand hovering for only a second before it drops to his side. He looks pained, but slowly, he shakes his head. And then turns and slips back into Tubbo's room before the door can shut on him.

It doesn't sting. It doesn't.

Tommy stomps off, a thundercloud looming over his head, storm brewing.

The bad mood sticks around well into the next day. Tommy avoids Tubbo and Ranboo like the plague, making sure they know he's avoiding them, fingers shaking at every turn with both anger and nerves. In being that petty, however, other people catch up on it too. And quickly.

"What's with you three?" Wilbur asks, after Tommy turns heel upon seeing Ranboo and Tubbo at breakfast. He's caught up with him in the hallway— Tommy wasn't sure where he was going to go, but he was going to go somewhere."Did you fight? Should I go kick their asses?"

"I don't need you picking my fights for me," Tommy snaps, glancing over and shooting a scowl Wilbur's way. "Fuck off."

“Oh damn.” Wilbur pauses, and he disappears from Tommy’s view for only a moment before he catches up once more. “Okay. So... you did fight. Alright.”

“Gonna make fun of me for it?” Tommy snaps, his bad mood sizzling still, and Wilbur shakes his head. He reaches out— and Tommy stops as Wilbur’s hand lands on his shoulder, heavy and warm. “Let me go,” he says quietly. Wilbur does, but his hand lingers, hovering over him.

“Wait here,” he says. Tommy’s anger turns to confusion, to utter bafflement as Wilbur darts back down the hall and into the breakfast room. He stands there, unsure if he should listen or not, but by the time he’s made up his mind Wilbur is already hurrying back towards him, smiling wider than he had been before.

“What are you doing?” Tommy asks as Wilbur brushes by him. He follows after a second, Wilbur gesturing for him to keep up.

“What are *we* doing,” Wilbur corrects. “And we are not going to court this morning.”

“What?” Tommy scowls. “Are you serious?”

“Very,” Wilbur says. He takes a turn and Tommy squints. They’re heading down towards the smaller exit out of the palace, walking at a quick pace. “You’ve been to the stables.” It’s a comment, not a question.

“A few times,” Tommy says. “Once or twice.”

“We have plenty of steeds that are easy to handle,” Wilbur says. “You’ve ridden?” That’s a question. Tommy has to jog to catch up to him for a moment— curse his stupid legs.

“Yes?” he says. “What kind of a question is that?”

“Good,” Wilbur says. He glances at Tommy, looking him up and down. “It’s warm enough out I think you won’t need a jacket. Rare for us.”

“I’m wearing a jacket already,” Tommy bristles, then the implications sink in. “We’re going outside?”

“I just asked my father,” Wilbur says cheerfully. “And he said yes, as long as we bring a guard. The flowers will be blooming in the valley. It’s a short ride. Come along.”

“Outside,” Tommy repeats, a bit struck. He can’t go outside. He has things to do here, a coup to plan and put into place for tomorrow night, he needs to— he needs—

He’s so angry, even now, with Tubbo and Ranboo. He can’t leave them behind and pray they won’t tell. He can’t stay here and be in the same palace as them, on the verge of exploding. He doesn’t know what he should do.

But he knows what he *wants* to do.

With hesitant footsteps, he follows Wilbur out to the stables.

The royal palace has a wide array of horses. Wilbur's is a lovely mare named Simone. He coos as he feeds her sugar cubes, snuck out in the pocket of his jacket. For Tommy, they find a smaller mare named Clementine. She's brown and has a braided mane, an orange ribbon tied to keep it that way. She is sweet and gentle and the best thing Tommy has ever seen. They spend an hour or so just with the horses as the stable hands get them ready to ride, chatting about nothing at all as the sun rises higher in the sky and burns off the remaining nighttime fog. By the time Tommy mounts Clementine and rides out into the square, reins in his hands and Wilbur by his side on Simone, it's above them. It warms the top of his head, makes him squint.

They have a guard procession with them, but it's nothing Tommy isn't used to. For only the third or fourth time ever, he leaves the gates of the palace and travels down into the Fourth Ward, then from there into the third, second, and first. Preparations are gathering for the celebrations tomorrow— blue and white banners, flowers and food stalls. People gather as they pass, waving happily and shouting praises and glory from the sides of the roads. Wilbur soaks it all in with a wide smile and charming words. Tommy makes sure to smile and wave as well, the picture of grace. Everything a potential king should be.

He's faking it, of course. He needs these people to like him. He needs the population on his side, so when a little girl offers him a chrysanthemum after handing one up to Wilbur, he takes it and tucks it in his lapel. She giggles, and her mother's eyes practically gleam. It's a lie. It's fake. The fondness he feels, the sun melting away his anger from before, it's all a lie to get him where he needs to be.

Wilbur, too, is a lie. A brilliant, shining lie, glittering as they pass through the grand gates that make up the entrance to the city proper and continue past merchant shops and wagons. Down through the main street and past the people, taking a left where Wilbur instructs. Crow's Chasm is enormous— Tommy can hardly see the cliffs that make up the other side of it, shrouded in a blueish fog. The sky is clear and cloudless. The air is warm— there's still a chill in the air, of course, but it's the warmest Tommy thinks it's ever been. Summer is here, and the solstice is coming. They pass through a thicket of trees, a windbreak for the city proper, and then into the fields of the chasm.

They're grand. In the warmth, hundreds of thousands of flowers have bloomed in every color imaginable. Tommy stares, his mouth dropping open at the sight of them all against the green grass. They continue along a small path tracked into the dirt, Wilbur leading the way on Simone as they clop through the small hills and over a tiny babbling brook before finally, he brings Simone to a stop.

"Here, I think," he calls back to Tommy, and then smiles at his expression. "Shut your mouth, you'll catch flies."

"It's so *pretty*," Tommy says, because it is. The guards linger behind them, close enough to be seen but not close enough to bother. Wilbur slips off the back of his own horse, Tommy following, and he hesitantly lets go of the reins after Wilbur does. The horses don't go far— in fact, Clementine hardly takes one step before she lowers her head to the ground and starts to

graze at the long grasses. They come up to Tommy's hips in some places, other times staying low to the ground. They meander for a bit, the sun high in the bright sky above them.

"Is everything okay?" Wilbur asks after a few minutes of silence. In the distance, the rooftops of Raven's Flight gleam. Tommy fixes his gaze on them for a second and then looks back at Wilbur, who's shielding his eyes from the sun and squinting in Tommy's direction.

"What?" He asks. There are flowers fisted in his hand, held tight, the stems sharp enough to cut.

"Are you alright?" Wilbur asks, making his way over and gently laying a hand on Tommy's shoulder. He doesn't shy away from it this time. "These past few days, you've seemed... quiet. Withdrawn. And now this morning. Is everything okay?"

Tommy can't tell him the whole truth. He settles for a half.

"Tubbo and Ranboo and I fought," he says. "We've been kind of split for a while."

"About what?" Wilbur asks, curious. Tommy shrugs.

"It's not important," he lies.

"If it's important enough to argue about," Wilbur says, "then it must be something."

"It's really not," Tommy intones, slipping out from under his hand and messing with the flowers he's holding. He's gathered a bundle of them, only some of which he recognizes; black-eyed susans, rudbeckia, bird's foot trefoil, lobelia, Queen Anne's lace. The rest is all fodder, or grasses he's stuck in between. It makes a pretty bundle, purple and white and yellow.

"You don't want to tell me," Wilbur says, leaning down to stick his face in Tommy's. "Why not? Don't you trust me?"

Tommy scoffs. "Yeah, about as far as I could throw you," he sneers. Wilbur tips his head.

"I reckon that's quite far," he says. "Techno says you're a good fighter."

Oh please, can they not talk about that now. "I'm okay," Tommy says. "Not as good as him."

"Still." Wilbur stares at him and Tommy turns away, bending down to pick another flower and add it to his lineup. He glares at it's petals, soft and yielding under his fingers.

"Do you know how to make flower crowns?" he asks, brash and loud and harsh. Wilbur blinks.

"Not really," he says. Then, a bit more teasing: "Why, do you?"

"Yes," Tommy says, leveling him in a glare worthy of the sun above. "Bitch."

“I wasn’t going to say anything!” Wilbur crows, and Tommy scowls at him as the older boy laughs. “I wasn’t, really, Tommy, I wasn’t.”

“I changed my mind,” Tommy says, turning away as his cheeks flare up in embarrassment. “I’m not making you one anymore.”

“Aw, pretty please?” Wilbur asks, cooing again as he comes over and hangs off of Tommy’s shoulder, a warm line of body heat that he is ultra-aware of. “Make me one. Make me one.” His hand comes up and pokes Tommy’s cheek. “Make me one.”

“Eugh, fine, if you get off,” Tommy says, scowling hard as he pushes Wilbur away and eyes him. He takes a step away and then sits, planting his butt in the grass and twisting his mouth to the side. He remembers how to make these— Dream had shown him once, long ago. It’s easy once he remembers, twisting the stems of flowers carefully and choosing only the prettiest, best ones for Wilbur’s crown. It doesn’t take him long. He holds it up sooner than later, and Wilbur bows his head, having sat down beside him to wait.

“You use your left hand,” he notes. “I thought you were right-handed?”

“I use both,” Tommy says hotly, and Wilbur sits up straighter now with his crown, reaching up to poke at the petals.

“Oh, ambidextrous,” Wilbur teases. “Born lucky.”

Tommy rolls his eyes, and then sets about making himself a crown. He uses the same flowers he’d used for Wilbur’s, although for his he uses more Queen Anne’s lace. It comes out frizzy and white and pretty, and when he looks up to show Wilbur the other boy has wandered a little bit away, staring up at the sky.

Tommy tips his head up to join him. The sky is so bright and blue. Summer is truly here, her warm breath rustling the grass and flowers in great waves. If Tommy squints, makes his vision blurry, it almost looks like the ocean. He understands now why the poets write what they do, or why painters are struck by their muses. He understands that itch in their fingers to create, the one Wilbur had once tried and failed to explain to him. A painting sits out beyond him, the city glistening in the distance with the stronghold palace like a cake topper. The fields peppered with wildflowers, and there in the center of it all, Wilbur. Wilbur, who is out of breath and smiling on the tail end of a laugh, the wind catching his hair and lifting it just enough for the sun to beam through in honey-golden rays. He grins at Tommy and then dramatically, falls to the ground, a hand pressed to his forehead and messing up the crown Tommy had given him.

It’s perfect. Tommy never wants this afternoon to end.

As if hearing the thought from his mind, Wilbur sits up. His flower crown is lopsided. His smile is wide, but gentler now, and Tommy stares at him. His hands are shaking now, violently, and he grips his bouquet harder like it might make them stop.

“We should head back,” Wilbur says. “Before it gets too much later. I told dad we’d only be a bit.”

“But it’s so nice out,” Tommy whines. He doesn’t want to go back to the palace and it’s cold passageways that are filled with tension and stress. Out here, it’s like none of it exists at all.

“I know,” Wilbur says. “We can come out again another day.”

Tommy swallows. No, they can’t. “Just a few more minutes?” he pleads, looking up at Wilbur and sticking out his lower lip. It always worked on Dream— and after a second, it works on Wilbur too.

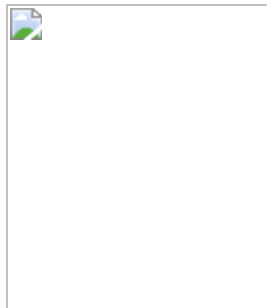
“A few more minutes,” he concedes, glancing over back the way they came. “Hm. Want to go see if there are any frogs in the brook? They usually wake up about now.”

“Wake up?” Tommy asks, clambering to his feet. Wilbur’s face lights up.

“Oh, yeah,” he says. “Frogs like, hibernate when it gets too cold. Up here it’s always cold, so they only come out when it gets really warm, like today—”

Tommy sinks into the sound of his voice as they walk, listening as Wilbur tells him about every frog species they currently know of north of the Isles border and how each of them hibernate for different times and blah blah blah. It’s boring. It’s simple.

It’s nice.



Tommy is crying.

He can’t help it. Once he’d opened the floodgates with Kristin the other day, he finds himself with tears in his eyes more often than not. And now, he is crying because he is guilty.

The day in the meadow with Wilbur had been fucking wonderful. Whenever Tommy thinks about it, though, his chest seizes up and he bites his lip until it bleeds.

Does he deserve what Tommy is going to do? Do any of them?

Why is he thinking about going back now? Dream’s voice echoes in his mind— *I will do this with or without you.*

Maybe he can find Dream. Maybe he can explain, and maybe he can postpone this whole thing for a bit while he figures shit out. Because the Empire deserves to know the same pain he knows, but at the same time... they’ve been kind. Wilbur has been kind. Kristin has been kind. Out of all people, Tommy does not think Kristin should die. Their people are happy,

and things are good underneath their rule. Their plan is foolish— would people really think Wilbur did it all? Could Tommy even pin the blame on him, after today?

Doubt creeps in, infecting his mind and making him shake. He needs to figure this out; he needs to find Dream. He's in his room now, having hidden there most of the evening. He should be out making sure Tubbo and Ranboo aren't fucking snitching on him and getting ready, but he's here instead, crying. Like a baby. He has shit to do.

The coup is *tonight* .

Tommy is halfway to the door, ready to go out and hunt down Dream and talk to him about this when someone knocks on it.

It takes him by surprise. He jolts, freezes, and then frantically rubs at his face to get rid of the dampness that was left over from his tears. He slips off his shoes and heads over, pausing for a moment before slowly opening the door.

Technoblade is standing outside his room. His face is smooth, impassive— Tommy stands there in turn, staring up at the man with a scowl on his face. He hopes evidence of his tears are gone, scrubbed clean from his face. There's a roiling hatred in his gut when he sees Techno, mixed with confusion; he wants to tuck himself under that great big cloak of his and never see the light of day again, comforted where it is warm and dark and safe. He wants to rip his head off his neck and please Dream, get his kingdom back. His head feels like it's going to split in two.

“What?” he snarls, hiding his fear behind annoyance. Technoblade stares down at him.

Then, he says in a terrifyingly even, emotionless tone: “Philza wants to see you in his office.”

Tommy's blood runs cold.

## Chapter End Notes

ART FORTHIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#)AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

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MUAHAHAHAHHAHAH

i have an announcement! the last two chapters will be posted sooner than later- specifically, they will be posted wednesday this week and then the final chapter will be up on saturday! so you don't have to wait as long for the cliffhanger ahahah



i hope you're all well :) thoughts? predictions? just general screaming?

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if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc V. - what goes up

### Chapter Summary

tws: minor blood

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The door clicks shut behind him.

Tommy had been silent the whole way there. Technoblade had been too— there had been no meaningless chatter that normally fills the space between them, no jokes, no prying on Tommy's end to try and get any nub of gossip out of the man he could. Just complete and utter silence. Tommy is exhausted, and he knows he's not going to get any sleep tonight, either. The fatigue weighs on his mind, making him paranoid. Technoblade's silence tells him nothing. Does he know? Is he bringing Tommy to his doom? The general just nods when he leaves him by the door to Philza's study, eyes unreadable as Tommy searches them for anything. He just *nods* .

And so Tommy goes inside, and the door clicks shut behind him.

Philza is sitting at his desk; he's still in his daily clothes, minus a few layers and minus his crown, as well. His hair is pulled up, a messy braid on either side holding back the front pieces, but strands have escaped and now swing downwards as he hunches over his desk and scribbles a pen against paper. When the door clicks, he looks up, eyes crinkling at the sight of Tommy.

"Oh, good," he says. Tommy stares at him. "I didn't know if you were still up or not. Come, sit."

( *Does he know, does he, does he, does he—* )

Tommy warily goes to sit in one of the chairs opposite Phil, chewing on the inside of his cheek so fiercely he tastes blood.

"What did you need me for?" he asks, fear gripping him as Phil sets down his pen, pushes a few papers aside, and leans back in his seat. He doesn't look like a man who'd just recieved word about a plot to murder him. He looks at Tommy with only a soft sort of fondness in his eyes, and— well, Tommy looks away. Down at the desk, unable to read whatever he'd been writing but pretending to be interested anyways so he doesn't have to look Phil in the eyes. He's a coward, he'll admit it, but if this is his death sentence then he thinks he has the right to be one.

“I wanted to go over some of the terms of the treaty with you,” Phil says, and he leans his elbows on the desk, laces his fingers together. Tommy’s eyes snap up to his face once more.

...maybe he doesn’t know.

Maybe this is all a coincidence.

“Oh,” he says. “Okay?”

“You remember the last clause, yeah?” Phil asks, and Tommy nods his head, albeit slowly. The days of treaty-making and signing are fuzzy in his head. He’d been constantly sick when he’d first arrived in the Empire, and the colds didn’t make retaining information easy. But he can remember it to a certain degree. “Hold on,” Phil says, shuffling some papers and then opening a drawer. “I have a copy here somewhere. Here.”

Paper, scattered across the desk in front of him. Tommy lifts it up— two sheaves, front and back. His own signature staring at him in the face like a brand. He remembers signing it. He remembers the tears that went unshed that night, held back with all the force he could muster.

His entire life, reduced to a two fucking pieces of paper.

“Article five,” Phil continues, oblivious to Tommy’s internal turmoil, or at least acting like he has no idea. Tommy is still wary, but he thinks this visit may be coincidental. It has to be. He scans the pages, slowly reminding himself of the articles and the things that went so, so wrong.

“Yeah,” he says slowly. “The part where I’m left under your care.”

“Right,” Phil says. “So. I was thinking. It’s only been six months or so, but in that time, I feel like things have changed significantly.”

“You want to make changes to the treaty?” Tommy asks, cutting him off. Maybe a few months ago he would’ve been terrified to do so, but now he has no qualms.

“No, no, not really,” Phil says. “Well. Sort of? I want to uphold it, in a way. It says— here, look, article five—” Tommy looks. “— it says, council of all present powers to reassess his right to throne upon the tutelage and decisiveness of His Majesty, blah blah blah. Well. I’ve been reassessing.”

“Court,” Tommy says slowly, and it dawns upon him then. The tutoring. The mornings spent in court with Philza, being tested, being observed. Something horrible is occurring to him.

“Yeah,” Phil says. “I’ve been assessing. And I’d like to discuss the terms of your reinstatement.”

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck* .

“Okay,” Tommy says, mouth dry. “I— okay.”

“Is it too late?” Phil asks, looking mildly concerned at Tommy’s expression. He forces his face to smooth over. “We can take this up tomorrow, if you want.”

“No, no, now is fine,” Tommy says, swallowing cotton. It scratches, his throat so fucking dry, and he resists the urge to cough and fails. Phil raises a brow as he hacks for a moment. “I just– wasn’t... expecting that. Excuse me.”

“It’s okay,” Phil says, and he’s smiling. Fucking bastard. Tommy’s heart is jackrabbiting, hands shaking as he clenches the paper between them. “Here, we can just do the basics right now. I was thinking, as a start, you joining my court properly with a title. We can figure out a way to do that, mostly just for formality. They love you there.”

“Right,” Tommy says. His head feels like it’s on fire. Fuck.

What has he done?

“And then,” Phil continues, looking across his desk, still fucking oblivious to Tommy’s panic, “when you turn eighteen, I think we can reinstate.”

“Eighteen?” Tommy croaks.

“I know it sounds like a long time,” Phil says, and Tommy wants to shake him because in the grand scheme of things that is no time at *all*, “but it’s important you grow up a bit. I think the time would be good for you. And over the next three years, we can figure out how we want to do this– a lordship, or some kind of oversight on my part, maybe until you’re twenty-five or we make an agreement. From there, I think it would be smart that the Isles return to some sort of independence. The people are...” Phil winces a bit. “Well, they don’t want to be part of the Empire.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, and he can’t help but roll his eyes a bit. “I could’ve told you that.”

“I know, I know,” Phil snorts a laugh, leaning his elbow on the desk and then his head against his palm, staring down at the pages. “I just wanted your thoughts. It’s been on my mind for a while.”

“So... the war,” Tommy says quietly. “Was it all for nothing?”

Phil is quiet, still staring down at the desk.

“No,” he says. “Not– not nothing.”

“Then what was it for?” Tommy asks. Phil sighs, his shoulders heaving as he does so, and he drags his hand down his face.

“...after the Cataclysm,” he says quietly, and Tommy’s hands are trembling still. “People needed a leader. There was so much death, Tommy. So much loss. And when the Isles– when you refused to listen and get along, refusing the trade and treaties, I just– I thought it was inevitable. Your country was stocking up for war. So I did the same. I wanted a safe future for Wil, for everyone, and war was... I had to strike first. I had to be decisive.”

“We weren’t stocking up for war,” Tommy says quietly. “We were barely getting by.”

“From the outside, it looked different.” Phil looks down, and shuts his eyes briefly. “I realize now I was wrong. I panicked, I blamed you. And I– I shouldn’t have done that. This was *never* your fault. You were nine, you were never in control. I didn’t make the decision lightly and– it wasn’t your fault. It was mine. And I’ll bear that weight. But I can make it right, now, and I want to.”

Tommy stares at him.

“I’m sorry,” Phil says, looking up at him, eyes quiet and sad and so, so tired. “I’m sorry, Tommy.”

Tommy can’t say anything. His mouth is stuck shut, lips glued together by sheer force of upset. Phil sighs again, reaching out to gently take the treaty from his hands and smooths it out absently, looks it over. Tommy just sits there. He can’t fucking move.

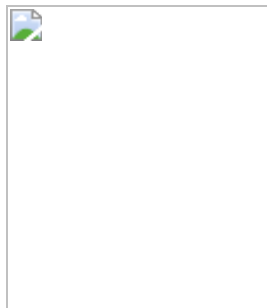
“I know you probably don’t want to forgive me,” Phil admits. “And that’s okay. I just– wanted you to know that I was wrong. And despite it all, I am truly glad I met you. You’re a bright kid. Smart, clever, a good leader. We’re all happy you’re here, Tommy. And, please, forgive me if this crosses a line, but–”

No.

“–at times, I can almost think of you as my own, just as Wilbur is.”

Tommy pushes up from the chair, nearly sending it toppling over with the force. Phil flinches as he goes, eyes wide, mouth opening to ask a question or maybe say something else, something that makes Tommy feel horribly guilty. “I have to go,” he says, stabilizing the chair with one shaking hand and then turning.

“Tommy,” Phil says, and the concern dripping from his voice makes him want to throw up. He fights with the door handle, and behind him he can hear Phil getting up, the movement of his chair against the rug but he manages to throw the door open before the older man can catch him or say anything else. He makes it two steps out of the room before he bolts, darting past a concerned looking Technoblade and racing down the hall.



He’s fucked up.

He’s fucked up bad.

Tommy races down the hall, eyes wide and panicked, and stops only for a moment at a crossroads. It's dark out— late, nearly time for things to begin. He's got so little time and so much regret.

He doesn't want the royal family to die.

Tommy reaches up, chest heaving as he breathes, and runs his hands through his hair. Gripping so hard he practically rips some strands out, scalp stinging, he glances down the hallways. He'd left Phil and Techno behind— he needs to make a decision now. The guilt is rising just as quick as the sea, water lapping at his feet. He can't do this. All that doubt that had crept in, the fight with Tubbo, everything; is Tommy in the wrong? He must be. He hates the royal family, he does, but they're human too. Phil apologized, for fuck's sake. He said—

He'd said Tommy was like—

Fuck.

Tommy sinks against the wall and drags his hands down his face, gritting his teeth. He knows he's made his decision already, but admitting it is another thing altogether. He doesn't want them to die. He wants more summer afternoons with Wilbur, he wants Kristin to listen to him play piano, he wants a hug from Phil. He wants to sword fight with Techno and pull his punches.

Tommy staggers to his feet once more, and turns down the hall towards Tubbo's room.

He should turn around and find Technoblade and Philza, but he can't. If he told them— what would they do? He needs people who know the plan, people who can go without question to start to dismantle what Tommy's started. Tubbo and Ranboo are the obvious choice, even though they'd argued. They'd argued and Tubbo had been right. Tommy's mind is racing at the moment but all he can think properly is: Tubbo had been justified. Tommy doesn't want to do this, not when there's a legitimate chance of him getting his kingdom back. He can find Dream and explain once they'd managed to stop this before it even starts.

He skids to a stop in front of Tubbo's door, slipping along the smooth stuff in his socks as he grasps at the door handle. It's locked, of course, but Tommy doesn't hesitate to pound his fist against the wood, frantic slams that rattle the whole door. It only takes a second for someone to click the lock and throw it open; Tubbo, not even in his pajamas, hair mussed and eyes dark and worried. His expression twists when he sees Tommy, but something must cue him into the urgency. Whether it be Tommy's heaving chest as he catches his breath or the entirely sorrowful look on his face, he's not sure. It doesn't matter.

"Tubbo," he says, and then, "you were right, I'm sorry—"

"Come in," Tubbo says before he can continue. Tommy stumbles forward when he opens the door more, hands braced on the wood as he closes it quietly. Ranboo is on the bed— sitting, papers spread out and a rumpled spot in the sheets where Tubbo had likely been up with him. Neither of them look like they're ready for bed. That's probably good.

“What’s going on?” Ranboo asks, straightening up when he sees Tommy and shifting to clamber off the bed. “Is everything okay?”

Tommy’s just about caught his breath now. He finds Tubbo in his gaze, eyes burning.

“You didn’t snitch,” he says. Tubbo’s face closes up, shutters over his eyes.

“No,” he says slowly. “We didn’t. But Tommy, I’m not—”

“I’m sorry,” Tommy says, and he feels some part of him crumpling. “Tubbo, I’m so sorry. I don’t want to— I don’t want to be fighting with you.”

“I don’t want to fight either,” Tubbo says slowly, as though he’s gauging the situation and turning it over in his head.

Tommy swallows. “You were right,” he says. “And I’m so sorry.” Emotion builds in his chest, and everything has just been too much today. And now, looking at Tubbo, that’s more guilt layered on top of the shitty sundae. “Phil wants— he wanted to reinstate me and I’ve just been— everything’s been so fucking much, there’s ribbons in my head, Tubbo—”

“Ribbons?” Ranboo queries. Tommy just shakes his head.

“I fucked up,” he says. “I need to stop this. I need to stop it before it starts, and then I can find Dream and we can figure shit out.” Both of his friend’s faces contort at that, but Tommy pushes onwards. Tears gather in the corners of his eyes but he refuses to let them fall, refuses to let it show. “I know you might still be angry at me, and that’s okay, that’s fine, but please. Please help me do this one thing, please help me make it okay. I’ve- I fucked it up. I fucked up. Please. I’m *begging* you.”

Silence stretches, and Tommy sniffles pathetically. He feels stupid and pathetic here in their shadows, small.

When they don’t say anything, Tommy starts to stutter again, stumbling over his words. “I just— I— I— I hate fighting, Tubbo, I hate it, and I hate being wrong but I hate fighting with you more. And I don’t— I don’t want this to be the end of it, you know? I never had friends before and you guys are just really good and I don’t wanna let this be the end of it, end of everything, I want to keep— I want to keep it, please, help me keep it, please—”

“We’ll help,” Ranboo says quietly. Tubbo is still silent, mouth pressed into a grim line as he stares at Tommy. Ranboo places a hand on his shoulder, and they exchange a quiet look. Tommy’s cheeks are wet, all of the sudden. Tubbo looks back at him.

“You want to stop the coup?” he asks. Tommy nods.

“Yeah,” he gasps. “I do.”

Tubbo bites his lip. Looks at Ranboo again, then back at Tommy.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. We’ll help.”

Tommy practically deflates. “Thank you,” he says, “Tubbo, thank you—”

“And I’m sorry too, for the record,” Tubbo says before he can continue, cutting him off. “I should never have— I’m sorry.”

“Should never have what?” Tommy asks, reaching up with one hand to wipe at his face absently.

“Oh for Prime’s sake,” Tubbo scoffs, and then tips his head and admits: “Let it get this far, I guess. I dunno. I’m just sorry, boss man.”

“So we’re both sorry?” Tommy asks. Tubbo nods. Tommy glances at Ranboo and raises a brow.

“Oh, yeah, me too,” he says. “I’m definitely sorry.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” Tommy says wetly, a laugh forcing its way out of his throat before he can stop it, and Ranboo snorts, and so does Tubbo, and if that doesn’t make his heart soar. “Please help me,” he says again, for what feels like the thousandth time. “I need you.”

And that admission, quiet but true, is what breaks the camel’s back. Tommy’s not alone anymore; Dream isn’t the only one on his side. He’s got friends now, people who care, people who look at him like he’s worth more than the crown on his head. Before he can stop himself, Tommy’s stepping forward and scooping Tubbo into a hug, ignoring how the other boy goes stiff and how Ranboo just sort of throws an arm over his shoulder. Slowly, as though he’s petting a wild animal, Tubbo brings his arms up around Tommy’s torso in turn.

“We’ve got you, boss man,” Tubbo says quietly, breath hot by his ear, and Tommy buries his head into his hair. He feels a nose on top of his own head and knows Ranboo is doing the same, and he gives himself one moment, one quiet, peaceful moment of satisfaction before he pulls away, shaking Ranboo’s arm off his shoulders and swallowing hard.

“We need to go now,” he says, wiping at his face once more to really get all the dampness off his cheeks. “Like, now-now.”

“Right, right, okay,” Ranboo says, and Tubbo nods grimly. They jump into action— Tommy’s mind pulls away from that saccharine interaction with affection still clinging to his thoughts like taffy, stretching wide in the gap between logic and feeling. Tubbo grabs a bag from the bedside table, and Ranboo slips his shoes on, Tommy backing up until his shoulder blades tap the door and waiting until they’re ready.

“Okay,” Tommy says, flinging open the door to Tubbo’s room as all three of them stagger out into the hall. Ranboo’s wringing his hands in front of him as they make their way down the cold stone, past the corner and down the next hall, long windows to their left. Tommy whirls around, taking a few steps backwards as Tubbo and Ranboo follow, and then he pauses.

“Okay,” he repeats. “We need to go warn— we have to— disable the explosives. Tubbo, can you do that?”

Tubbo nods. “Sure,” he says. “As long as we get there before the timers—”



As if on cue, huge blasts shake the floors. One by one, timed perfectly. All three of them whip their heads to the side as bursts of color streak past the windows, exploding into vibrant clouds of shimmering light. Six of them go off in total, blasting off in even intervals, and for a moment all three of their faces are lit up in the multicolored light. The booms fade, the ground settling. A second later, shouts can start to be heard after the echoing shock dissipates into mild panic.

“Nevermind,” Tubbo says smoothly.

“Change of plans,” Tommy says, clapping his hands in front of him. “Ranboo, go warn Technoblade and get him to the Great Hall as fast as you can. He should be in his quarters. Tubbo, go take down the rest of the fireworks and then get to the Great Hall.”

“What about you?” Ranboo asks, even though he’s already stumbling away down the hall to go and hopefully find Techno before anything can happen.

“I need to go save Wilbur,” Tommy says, and then turns and runs.

By the time he reaches Wilbur’s door, he can hear shouting echoing down the halls.

He’d raced to get here, out of breath with the cold floor seeping through the fabric of his socks. He’d run, because he has to get here before Purpled does, and the explosions had been the signal. The second they’d gone off, everyone had moved into their place. And Purpled is on his way, and Tommy has to get there before he does because he has to save Wilbur. He has to. Techno will be fine as long as Ranboo gets to him, and Tubbo is going to dismantle the rest of the fireworks that are set to go off in fifteen minutes. Phil will be fine, because Tubbo will get to the Great Hall around the same time as him, after he saves Wilbur.

Heart pounding, feet slipping across the floor, Tommy nearly crashes into Wilbur as he rounds the corner and finds himself at his door. The sudden terror is overcome with relief as he takes in the other prince’s state— completely and utterly unharmed by the looks of it, eyes wide as his hands come up to steady Tommy’s shoulders. He’s in his pajamas, hair mussed.

“Tommy,” he says, and then a second later, “what’s going on, I heard explosions?”

“I—” How does Tommy even begin to explain this? He swallows, then settles for a little white lie. “I don’t know. We should go back to your room, your dad said, I don’t know, I heard them too—”

“My dad?” Wilbur peers over his shoulder, then back at him, scouring his face. “Is something happening?”

Fuck, what does he say? “He told me to tell you,” Tommy says, a bit frantically. “To tell you to go inside and lock your door and not open it for *anyone* .”

“Yes, okay, but what’s going *on* ,” Wilbur says quite loudly as Tommy grabs one of his wrists and tugs him back down the hall, towards his bedroom. “Did something explode? Did you

see something?” And when Tommy doesn’t answer in time, too caught up in his own mind to be quick about it, “what did you see? Tommy?”

“Fireworks,” he says quickly. “Fireworks, and men fighting.”

Not a lie, although he’d only heard the men fighting, the sound of sword on sword. He’d avoided running into that.

“Fighting?” Wilbur asks, and they stop in front of his door, Wilbur stumbling and wrenching his arm from Tommy’s grasp. “Tommy– stop! Stop. What is going on?”

“I’m sorry,” Tommy says, mostly on instinct at this point. Wilbur isn’t listening to him; he’s not going in his room, he’s not hiding. He needs to hide. Tommy glances over his shoulder, and then back. Wilbur’s face is slightly contorted.

“Sorry?” he asks. “For what? What’s happening?”

“I don’t–” Tommy stumbles over his words, “I can’t– I’m just *sorry*. I think you’re going to find out some not-very-nice things very soon and I’m sorry for all of them, okay? But I– I need you to go in your room, Wilbur!” Frustration spills from his lips and he ends up shouting by the end of the sentence, Wilbur flinching back slightly as he stares down at him with wide eyes. Then, slowly, he steps backwards. Back into his room, one foot after another, and Tommy follows him just up to the doorway. They stare at one another, tension high line between them as Wilbur stares and Tommy makes sure he’s all the way in, constantly listening for the sound of approaching footsteps.

And then: “What did you do?” Wilbur asks quietly. As though he’s just had an epiphany. His eyes widen further, a look of utter despair crossing his face– “What did you *do*?”

“Please–” Tommy holds his hands up, taking a step back, but before he can get far Wilbur is storming towards him, leaning down to scoop up a sword from one of the spots by the wall. Ironically, this is one of the first times Tommy has seen his room. The bedding is a soft maroon. In the dim light of the lanterns, he can make out a guitar against the far wall, papers scattered on the floor, a desk with an inkwell. A fireplace and bookshelf.

There is a blade pointed at him now. Wilbur is glaring at him. Tommy raises his hands up higher.

“Wilbur please,” he says, and Wilbur just glares.

“Where is my dad?” he asks fiercely. “Where is my mum? Techno? What did you do, Tommy?” His voice breaks on Tommy’s name, bitter with betrayal.

“It wasn’t supposed to go this way,” Tommy chokes out, and there it is. His guilt, plain and empty on the floor for Wilbur to see. “I’m gonna– fix it, I’m gonna fix it, I *swear*–”

“What. Did. You. Do,” Wilbur enunciates. Tommy stares at him, unsure of what to say. They balance on the tightrope together, precarious as they hang over a precipice of disaster.

And then Wilbur lunges.

Anger, vicious in it's presentation, and Tommy scrambles to the side away from the prince's blade. He ducks and wobbles to the side, shouting Wilbur's name as he goes, hand flying out to grab and hold onto the unbalanced handle of a second sparring sword Wilbur just has lying around— he needs to clean his room holy fuck— but when Tommy comes back up and Wilbur turns, he's holding a weapon too. Wilbur's eyes lock onto it, and then flick up to Tommy's.

"Please," Tommy says, gripping the sword tightly. "It's not what you think—"

"Right," Wilbur cuts him off. "It's not what I think. You want your kingdom back, right? What's a little regicide?"

"Stop it," Tommy snarls.

"What, Tommy, are you scared?" Wilbur asks, stepping forward. Tommy scrambles back, still holding the sword up between them. They're both on edge, both a hair's width away from striking. "Scared that I'm right? You don't have to lie to me, come on."

"I'm not lying!" Tommy shouts, and Wilbur flinches. Then, with an even foot and a square, loose stance, he lunges. Tommy dodges to the side, but Wilbur doesn't stop this time, and there is the cacophonous clash of metal on metal. He doesn't want to fight Wilbur, and yet here they are, blades crossing in fluid succession. "Stop," he breathes, but Wilbur doesn't.

It is a quick fight.

They've both been trained since they were small to hold a weapon— Tommy thinks if things were different, if Wilbur hadn't gotten sick when he was younger, he probably would've had a disadvantage. But as things are, Wilbur is out of practice, and Tommy had spent a significant amount of time sparring with General Technoblade in the atrium over the winter.

It is a quick fight, and it is brutal.

Wilbur is playing with anger, twisting the sword between his fingers and eyes glinting just as dangerous as the metal in his hands. Tommy is defensive, but keen on winning. He takes his hits where he can take them— turning his blade, pulling punches, desperately trying to prove to Wilbur that he is not one of the enemies. Wilbur doesn't seem to care. He slashes and moves with purpose, fury lacing around him like a ribbon dancer and their twirling sticks. Tommy thinks he probably deserves that anger; no, he knows it, because he does and because this is all his fault. If only Wilbur would listen to him, but he's not, and so Tommy fights back with purpose to *win* so he can go and find Dream.

It comes to him more naturally than he thought possible— fighting Wilbur, that is. They match tune and follow along rhythm, kicking up dust as Wilbur defends the door and Tommy fights to take Wilbur down, or at least get him far enough away so he can run. He just needs to get out of here, and make Wilbur stay. It pains him every time he so much as bounces his blade off of Wil, and he can't tell what the other boy is thinking behind those heavy, hardened eyes. At one point, the edge of Tommy's blade catches by accident and Wilbur is left with a ripped sleeve and a gash in his arm. They both pause, panting as Wilbur stumbles back and lifts his free hand up to the cut, fingers coming away red. Tommy stammers, pushing words out through an exhausted mouth.

“Wil,” he says. “I’m so sor—”

Wilbur lunges forward, and Tommy barely has time to throw himself sideways. Even so, the swish of metal comes far too close to his face for comfort, and when he glances over there are strands of hair fluttering to the ground, wetness dripping down his cheek. Blood for blood—the cut is high on his cheekbone, stinging with a pulsing, radiating pain. Wilbur bares his teeth and Tommy bares them back, consumed for a moment with upset.

If Wilbur wants a fight, then Tommy will give him a fight.

Feet moving to the left, then right, a sway of pale moonlight sheathed by cobalt curtains and cut through with a broad swing of metal. Wilbur is caught in that light, shining through his hair as he turns his head to snarl at Tommy in a sick rendition of their day out in the sun. They clash and Tommy blinks back blurry vision and tears as he memorizes the way Wilbur walks, how he favors his right hand and foot. Quietly, Tommy prepares, and when he’s ready, he strikes.

It’s a move Technoblade showed him one sunny day in the atrium, back when winter had her cold fist closed around the city. A drop and a slam of the hilt onto someone’s head— they’d practiced, over and over. Tommy had found it boring after a while and they’d moved on, but even now the move comes instinctually. Tommy feints and Wilbur follows, and with a *crack* that leaves him wincing he slams the hilt of his sword into Wilbur’s temple. He crumples like a ragdoll.

It takes every effort in Tommy not to scream at the sight. That’s not right— none of this is right. He’s quick to kick Wilbur’s sword out of his hand though, and when the other tries to reach for it and sit up he holds his own blade out. The end of it shakes. Wil looks up, eyes hazy and gaze disoriented as he blinks at Tommy aimlessly. Then, carefully, he leans forward until his Adam’s apple presses against the tip of Tommy’s sword.

"Go ahead then," Wilbur says, dazed, quiet. Wilbur is not meant to be quiet. This is all *wrong*.

"I can't," Tommy chokes out, even with his blade neatly across the prince's throat. Then: "I won't."

"It's how it must be, isn't it?" Wilbur asks. He's surely still reeling from the blow to the head but there is clarity behind the fog. "For your plan to succeed?"

"I turned my back on that," Tommy whispers, like a secret. Their voices are hushed in the aftermath of the calamity of their fight. "I did, I swear—"

"Just do it, Tommy," Wilbur instructs. "We were foolish to not see it coming."

"I can't," Tommy pleads. "Stop saying that. I’m sorry. I have to— I have to go. But you have to stay here. I can’t protect you if you’re not here."

“Says the one who plotted our demise in the first place,” Wilbur hums. “I don’t blame you.”

“Yes you do,” Tommy says quietly.

“Yes,” Wilbur admits. “I do.”

They fall into silence. Tommy crouches by the bleeding prince, pulling his sword back but keeping it with him. Wilbur just watches. He swallows, and then stands. Wilbur shuts his eyes as Tommy turns his back. There are no apologies to be said between them anymore. Tommy has exhausted them all, and Wilbur has no reason to apologize.

“Please stay,” Tommy says. Wilbur doesn’t say anything in return, and so Tommy will just have to trust him. He makes his way to the hallway, gripping his sword tight and ignoring how the blade is stained. His mind is racing a thousand miles a minute as he shivers and stumbles forward. He’ll probably need it— no use to discard it now. He glances up and down the hallway, and then—

Freezes.

Purpled is standing there, a few feet away in the center of the passage. He watches Tommy as Tommy steps out of the doorway, and then fumbles with his sword. Purpled glances down at the blade, catching on the blood, and then shifts to peer behind him. Wilbur is still on the ground, Tommy knows. Definitely not dead.

“Tommy,” Purpled says, breaking the silence. “Why are you here?”

Time to jump into action. He’s failed. Wilbur isn’t safe. Tommy feels like he could cry, but at this moment all he can do is take a few steps forward and hold a hand out, staring at Purpled with desperation.

"Purpled, please," Tommy begs. Behind him, Wilbur is still slumped by the door, watching. "Please don't."

"Orders are orders, Tommy," the other boy says, and his eyes are hardened. His grip tightens on the sword. He'll fight Purpled if he has to, too, but then— a flash. Something else, behind that calculating gaze. Purpled is looking at him with desperation too, a plea, but in the same moment it appears, it's gone.

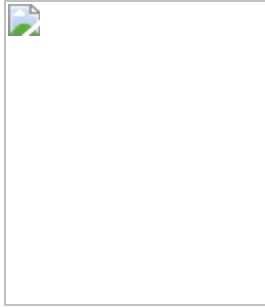
*Give me a reason*, he says without words.

"I'll pay you double whatever Dream is paying you," Tommy spits out, although he has no way of going through with the deal. Purpled glances him up and down, considering. "I'll pay you triple. Stay here and *guard* him, don't kill him."

Purpled tips his head to the side. His eyes glint again— maybe relief. Maybe they're just two kids in a world full of fear. Maybe, something like friends. He sheathes his sword in one fluid movement and holds his hand out.

"Deal," Purpled says, with no haggling, no fight. Tommy takes his hand and shakes.

He can't stick around. With one last mournful look back at Wilbur, he races down the hallway and hopes Purpled stays good to his word.



(Once upon a time, as often happens, two brothers stand on opposing sides.

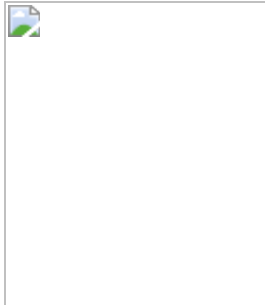
The younger holds his sword up at the first approaches. There is the sound of footsteps in the distance, marching in unison. The elder is breathing heavily, and he holds his sword up in turn. One because he was taught to do so, the other because he had been the instructor. They both know the rules. Silence drips between them. They'd been separated, but as things had started to crumble, the second round of fireworks failing to detonate, the eldest had gone looking.

"...we could go," the younger says after a minute, and if his voice cracks, it's no one's business but his own. He flicks blond hair out of his eyes. "Jump ship."

The elder stares at him. He raises his free hand to his chest and fumbles with the pendant there, then swallows.

They both lower their swords.

"Fuck this," the elder says. No one sees them leave. They're good at what they do.)



He runs.

Tommy stumbles into the throne room on unsteady feet, hands gripping the doorway that he's coming through like he's on a boat and the ocean is beneath them. Tommy never was able to get his sea legs right, even as a child of the Isles— everything had wobbled.

Everything is wobbling now, too. He's just not on the ocean.

Tommy freezes, caught on the precipice of the throne room and hallway, of safety and danger. In front of him, Dream stands with his shoulders back and head held high. Before him kneels Phil, hair loose and clothing rumpled, hands roughly and quickly bound behind his back. He is exactly where he should be, according to their plan. For a brief second, there's

a chance where Tommy is able to retreat. A moment when Dream's eyes are on the kneeling man in front of him, where Tommy would be able to turn heel and run and get a guard.

Dream's eyes snap upwards. Green eyes meet blue— the king is caught.

"Tommy," Dream says kindly, and his eyes drink in every detail. The sword Tommy is holding, the way he's hunched and panting, the cut on the high arch of his cheek and the devastated look on his face. "You're late."

He steps forward, shoes clipping through the silence. A battle is being waged here— outside, men cry out in pain as defected guards defend the throne room. Inside, Philza's shoulders tense.

"Tommy," he says, tipping his head backwards. He clearly doesn't dare move any farther than that; Dream's sword is already darkened with rusty red and the way the man is holding it indicates he is more than willing to let the Emperor's blood spill forth upon the stone floors. Kristin is nowhere to be seen. "Tommy, you're alright, where's—" He pauses, eyes catching on Tommy's sword, the blood there. The moment of relief Tommy had caught in his gaze passes, and instead turns to suspicion and dread. And worst of all— fear.

"Where's Wilbur?" Philza asks. "Tommy, *where's Wilbur?* "

Dream laughs.

The sound is low and satisfied, a rippling wave from a dropped stone in a lake. The calm is broken. Philza bares his teeth.

"You—" he begins, surging forwards, and there's desperation and upset and rage and Tommy takes a step back—

As Dream's sword presses into Philza's neck. He quiets. Stills entirely. Eyes still locked on Tommy, seemingly sick with worry. There's a cut on his cheek, similar to the scratch marring Tommy's own skin. He reaches up unconsciously, fingers ghosting over the dried blood and sting. Philza looks beaten down, exhausted already, terrified, angry— and Tommy is the center of that ire. Tommy is the center of this hurricane. He wants to tell him it isn't true, but there's something unhinged flitting between them, emanating from Dream's laugh. Something unsavable, and so, he holds his tongue.

"I'm so glad you came to your senses," Dream is saying, laughter petering off into a twisted version of amusement. "I was afraid we'd have to do this on our own, instill myself as emperor. I'm glad you're here to claim your rightful place, Tommy. Tell him how you feel." When Tommy is unable to say anything, voice caught in his throat, Dream raises a brow. "How do you feel, Tommy? How does he make you feel?" The blade digs into Phil's jaw, drawing the barest beads of blood. "Tell him!"

"I hate you," Tommy says, the words slipping out from his mouth as though he's reading them from a script. There is vicious mockery in his tone, but he feels none of it. Just an underlying dread as Dream's face lights up in a smile. "I hate— you. I hate what you did."

Only an hour or two ago, they were sitting at a desk together, and Philza had called him something akin to a son. Tommy watches that light die in the older monarch's gaze now, and feels something inside himself break too.

"What are we doing this for?" Dream asks quietly.

Tommy licks his lips. "Power," he says. It doesn't feel real. He doesn't want the power, he wants— Phil looks at him, and something softens. An edge in his eyes that wasn't there a moment ago, as though he can tell Tommy isn't being truthful. "I want control."

"You want control," Dream echoes. " *We* want control. Vengeance, for all the pain he made us suffer through."

"I—" Tommy's throat catches. He's unable to drag his eyes away from Phil. Dream seems to take it as something different than it is. He tips his wrist, baring the inner side of it to Tommy with a strange sort of eagerness.

"Come on," Dream whispers, the sound carrying through the whole room. He doesn't need to speak up to be heard. It simply happens. "Do it. Your claim through conquest."

Tommy steps forward, once, twice.

Here is a lie: Tommy has never once felt safe in the palace. He's never once stood on his balcony with his nose to the sky, staring up at the snow and tasting the flakes on his tongue. He's never once walked himself to Wilbur's room, to Phil's study, to Techno's atrium. The only comfort he seeks is in himself, in Dream.

He takes the sword, Dream's hand slipping out from under Tommy's. He'd dropped his own cracked sword on the short walk over, the clang of metal on stone ringing out and making his teeth hurt.

Here is a truth: Tommy is not weak. Once upon a time, mountains crumbled to the tune of a babe's newborn cry.

He steadies his fingers on the hilt of the sword, staring at the blade as it kisses the Emperor's neck. He drags his eyes up to Philza's, blue meeting blue. In another life, Tommy might speak one last truth: you could've been like the father I never knew.

He lifts the blade high.

## Chapter End Notes

ART FORTHIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#) AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)



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one more..... (or maybe two?)

to be or not to be (K-I-L-L-E-D)

next and possibly final update will be saturday noon est. be there or be square.

-

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## arc V. - must come down

### Chapter Summary

twos: character death, description of blood and injury, emetophobia

### Chapter Notes

here it is.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream is not expecting him. This is advantage number one. Advantage number two is that Dream is currently not armed. He's handed his own sword over to Tommy's hand, and he's not expecting the blade to be swung around behind and for Tommy to drop low, letting the sword fall from his left hand to his right.

*Ambidextrous*, Wilbur's voice echoes through his mind. *Born lucky, then.*

*Yeah*, Tommy thinks back, watching as Dream stumbles backwards in surprise, as the sword rings out across metal and sparks fly as the blade drags across armor. *Real lucky, that's me.*

"Tommy," Dream snarls, staggering backwards and glancing down at the deep scratch on his chestplate. Something flickers across his face before settling on a deep-seated anger. "The fuck are you doing?" Behind him, Phil inhales, sharp and tight. Tommy matches his breath to that pacing, letting his lungs expand and compress with intention.

"I don't need to claim anything," Tommy says, feet planted on the stone, bringing Dream's sword around and grasping it with two hands. The motherfucker is heavy, heavier than he normally uses. "The coup's off. Everything's off. The deal, you, me— I don't want this."

Dream's face grows darker and darker with every word.

"They're poisoning you," he whispers in the same tone he'd used a second earlier. His hands are gentle, raised in the air like they're soothing a startled animal. Tommy fights the urge to snarl, digging his heels into the ground— he is *not* an animal. "Tommy, please. See what I see. They stole you from me."

"You left," Tommy chokes out through his bared teeth as he levels his sword. "You left me to suffer alone in the fallout of a war *you* lost."

“Is that what they told you?” Dream asks, honey-sweet. It reminds Tommy of his own lies. The same tone of voice he’d used on Phil again and again, even for the most innocent of red herrings. “Tommy, we’ve talked about this.”

“No, you’ve talked about this,” Tommy hisses, steadying himself. Behind him, Philza shifts, and Dream’s eyes flicker back and forth for a moment. Tommy takes advantage of the distraction and rises himself up, puffs out his chest. “I am the king. I was the king. I am in line for the throne of the south, not you.”

There’s a glimpse of surprise there, on Dream’s face, before he shuts it down. To be fair, Tommy’s not even sure if Phil wants him to be in line anymore, not after this stunt, this betrayal.

“Tommy,” Phil says from behind him. His voice is weak. Tommy shakes his head, and Phil goes quiet.

“So you’re betraying me,” Dream says. His eyes are on the floor– they flit up to him. Tommy suddenly feels like a fly in the center of a spider’s web; the worst part is he can’t figure out who is the spider and who is the fly.

“You betrayed me first,” Tommy whispers back. “You gave up your right to be called family when you left me alone, with them.”

“Puh-lease, Tommy,” Dream says, and he reaches across his shoulder and back. The schwing of a blade being drawn is unmistakable, a second long line of deadly metal being swung out and displayed. Tommy swallows. “We’ll always be family. Do you think they’re your family?” He points the tip of his sword once more at Phil. “Him? Really?”

Tommy pauses. “No,” he says quietly. He doesn’t deserve them now.

“Exactly,” Dream snaps. “They aren’t your fucking family, Tommy. They don’t care about you.”

“That’s not true–” Phil says, but before he can continue Dream turns and stalks forward, slamming the hilt of his sword across his face. Something cracks– Tommy winces as the older man’s head is thrown to the side and blood starts pouring from his nose.

“He’s a liar,” Dream says, pulling his hand away and regarding Phil’s hunched-over form with no small amount of disgust. “Tommy, really, please try and see it. They’ve been lying to you.”

Tommy blinks, and then with all the courage in his heart, opens his mouth. “Lied to me like you did?” he asks. Dream scowls.

“What?” he asks.

“I– you lied to me too,” Tommy points out, taking a step back. “About the food. And not just that– about a lot of things. Bad things. I knew about them,” Tommy says quietly, then louder. “I knew about the bad things. I knew being king meant making hard decisions. I knew not

surrendering immediately was a death sentence for— for so many people." His voice cracks, and he inhales, sharp and rattly. "I knew what I was doing, meeting behind the backs of people to get supplies from the Vaults. Paying people off, fuck, we even—" He laughs, not bothering to lift an arm to wipe the wet tears from his cheeks. "I even sent out spies and shit. We had a whole reconnaissance unit. But it wasn't the only one, was it?"

Dream is silent. Tommy takes it as his cue to continue. "There were more," he breathes. "More spies. Spying on me. You were lying— lying to *me* ." The expression on Dream's face is akin to curdled milk. Tommy chokes out a laugh. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"Everything I did was to protect you," Dream says gently, but there is a thinly-veiled layer of anger behind it. "Tommy—"

"Bullshit!" Tommy snaps, throwing a hand out and forward to gesture at Philza. "How is this helping me?"

"We were going to make you king again!" Dream shouts and Tommy leans forward into the fight, eyes watering.

"What if I don't want to be king again?" he near-screams, and the echo of his words bounce off the walls, reverberating in his own ears. He gasps, staring at Dream as his brother's face goes from persuading to shocked to a cold, settled acceptance.

"Okay," Dream says. "Okay."

"Not *yet* ," Tommy whispers, quick to amend his statement. "Not king again yet."

"Tommy," Dream says, and he blinks fast and hard and tips his head, "I will not let you get in my way."

"What?" he breathes.

"You were never in control," Dream says, and it's cold and detached. Harsh. "Never. Is that what you want to hear? You sick of the lies? Fine. Fine, I'll tell you the truth. You were *never* the one in control. It was always me. You were just the figurehead. A face for a title, and they all fucking fell for it. Even him." Dream points at Phil, who's by now smeared the blood on his chin and is watching them with narrowed eyes. "They all thought it was you. But it wasn't. It was me. I was king, not you. I don't even— I don't even need you, Tommy! You were never special. All those rumors? About you and the Cataclysm? Bullshit! It's all rumor! You were just a baby. There was nothing special about you then, and there's nothing special about you now." Dream pauses, panting slightly as Tommy stares at him in growing horror. Then, as though he's stumbled upon a kingpin, Dream smiles. Slow and satisfied, a snake wrapped around its prey and getting ready to squeeze.

"You were never even your father's son," he says, and it's as though one of Tubbo's bombs has cracked and detonated inside his skull.

"You're a liar," he says quickly, sure that Dream is just messing with him. He has to be. Tommy's father is dead. He has been since he was a toddler.

“I’m a liar, huh? How about I tell you the truth in a way you’ll understand,” Dream says, taffy turned sour. “Do you want to hear a story?” Dream asks, and his voice is sickeningly sweet. The same type of tone he used when Tommy was a child, but now it is so much worse. Tommy can barely breath over the thick, cloying feeling it evokes in the back of his throat. A bastardization of something he once cherished. “Do you want a bedtime story, *Tommy*?”

“Fuck off,” Tommy says, and they circle one another, feet clacking against the stone. Dream swings his sword absently, and then reaches out to point it at Philza, who kneels to their side. He raises a brow.

“Listen to this story, pup,” he says, twisting the term of endearment on his tongue, “or I’ll slice his head off.”

Tommy is not fast enough to get to Phil in time, not before Dream could surely kill him. He judges the distance, narrows his eyes, and then sets his stance and grip. He watches a grin spread across Dream’s face, victorious and a little smug.

“Once upon a time,” he starts, “there was... a prince,” Dream says. He stalks to the side, closer to Phil, and Tommy tenses every muscle. But Dream doesn’t lift his blade to attack— he just sidles closer, a hand landing on Phil’s shoulder. “A prince not by blood or birth, but by how he was loved by a king.”

Is this about Tommy? Phil is glancing between them both, face pale and eyes not scared, but hesitant.

“This king was the ruler of a prosperous land,” Dream continues. “And the prince and him were the best of friends. The prince considered the man a father to him, and the king’s wife his mother, although she had not given birth to him. He was only a boy when the couple took him in from the streets, gave him a home, gave him a purpose.” He bares his teeth, and Tommy has the sudden realization: this story is not about him.

“He lived in the palace with them for years,” Dream says, and something in his gaze is a million miles away, ages into the past. “Loved, learned. The king taught him so many things about running a kingdom, and the queen was so kind and doting that he forgot she wasn’t his mother. The king and queen considered him a son, of course, but they wanted more. More children. And they tried— oh, they tried. For years they tried to have a baby, a biological child that they could love and raise just as much as they had loved the prince. And the prince wasn’t opposed to the idea. He’d always wanted a little brother.

But nothing was working. The king and queen were trying, but no baby was arriving. A chasm grew between them, and while they still loved one another, they grew distant. The prince watched from afar as it happened, engrossed in his studies but not ignorant to the struggles his family was facing. Dinners were quiet, and the queen spent her time alone instead of with the king. They were unhappy— they were disappointed.

And the prince wondered: was he enough? A sibling would be fun, yes, but wasn’t he enough? Why all this pain and suffering when they have one child already, bastard as though he may be?

The queen apparently, decided to take matters into her own hands.

One late night, the prince snuck down to the garden. He liked to watch the stars and name the constellations in his head— but once he arrived, he found himself an unwilling witness to a crime. The queen had decided it was her husband's fault they couldn't have a baby, and so she took it upon herself to find another man. They met at night under the darkness of new moons. The prince knew what was happening, but he loved the queen. He couldn't bring himself to break the king's heart by telling him, and he chose to forgive the queen in his own heart, especially after these secret meetings stopped.

And then the queen was with child.

And he watched as she came to term, he watched as the king doted upon her again, after so long ignoring her. He watched them be happy and a nursery be built, all for this baby. The prince watched, and the prince waited, and he knew. And then the baby was born, and the queen died, and the world ended, Tommy. The world ended.

The prince was just a teenager himself, then. The queen, his mother, was dead. And in her place was a bouncing baby boy with hair the color of gold, the same color of the palace guard who the queen had met with in the gardens. And I knew.

The king couldn't see it. He was enamored with you, and I tried to show him the truth. I told him about the queen's meetings with the guard, and you grew. You were barely six months old when I told the king how she had been unfaithful, and he didn't care. He loved you. He loved you more than me, because you were a reminder of her. He *still* loved her, even after her betrayal. I didn't understand then. I do now. Oh, Tommy, I understand now." Dream laughs, lifting his free hand to drag down his face as he turns to him. He gestures, throwing one hand wide as Tommy watches in mute horror, dread growing. "Have you ever felt anger mixed with love like that? Desperation? So strong you think it's going to consume you, so fucking strong. It's like a monster erupts from somewhere deep down inside, one you can't control. A monster that picks up a candlestick and smashes it over the king's head when he's pushed aside, a prince once beloved who is now second to a fucking *infant* that screamed and cried when the king fell. His head was so bloody, Tommy. But the prince did it. I did it."

Silence falls. Tommy's hands feel weak, and his stomach rolls over like he might throw up. Dream watches him, still satisfied, smiling. Tommy can see the scene in his head— a younger Dream with a bloody candlestick, enraged, with a screaming baby in the background. Dream licks his lips, and steps forward. Tommy steps back.

"And then there was the mess to clean up, of course," he continues, voice low. "But the king had been teaching me my whole life how to clean up political messes. How to get you crowned as king, how to instruct from the sidelines and shape everything I could. You loved me. You *listened* to me." Dream's hand comes up, cradling Tommy's cheek and digging his fingers into his hair. "You were my drop of sunshine in a bleak world, pup. The worst thing that ever happened to me, at first. We got there, in the end, didn't we?"

"Don't touch me," Tommy says, mouth dry. Dream's eyes narrow, and then in one swift move he digs his fingers deeper into Tommy's hair and pulls until it stings, until soft strands of blond come loose in his fist as Tommy squirms and pushes at him, tears pricking in the

corners of his eyes. Dream forces his head down into a bow, until his neck aches. “Stop it—stop— you *killed* him.”

Dream wrenches his head back up. “I did what I had to,” he hisses. “I did what I had to in order to protect myself, and you.”

“You killed him,” Tommy says again, staring him in the eyes. “You killed my dad.”

“He wasn’t your dad,” Dream tells him, eyes flashing with something akin to rage. “Were you not listening to me?”

“He loved me,” Tommy chokes out, and Dream’s fingers tighten a smidge more, enough for him to cry out in pain.

“He wasn’t your dad, Tommy,” Dream repeats, more anger coming through on the wind of his voice. “You were a bastard. Some stupid nobody was your father, and he’s probably long dead by now too. Good fucking riddance.” He lets go of his hair then, shoving Tommy away so hard he has to stumble backwards on his feet, sword dragging against the cobble of the floor.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Tommy asks, gasping for breath. He’d thought since he was a baby that he had been born into his right as king— the way Dream spins it, the only reason he was king at all was so Dream could— so he could... “Did you plan to kill me too?” He asks, horror dripping from the words as it all crashes down into place. “Did you want me dead so you could take the throne?”

“I fucking deserved it!” Dream shouts, swinging his sword out to the side and a vwoop of metal ringing between them. “They raised me, they taught me, they prepared me and then you were born and you ruined everything! I thought maybe if I—” Dream drags a hand down his face, laughing, breathless, almost hysteric, “maybe if I raised you to listen to my every word, then I could just rule from the sidelines until you were old enough for an accident to happen. I was so stupid. I should’ve killed you that day in the breakfast room.”

“You didn’t, though,” Tommy says, and his fingers are shaking, the world has dropped out from beneath him but he is alive and so that’s what really matters, right? “You didn’t, and now I’m— I’m king of the Isles. Not you.”

“Not anymore,” Dream laments, and they both flick their gaze to Philza. He’s been silent, watching this whole time with dried blood congealing on his lip. “That’s his fault. He ruined a lot of my plans, too. Don’t worry, you’re not alone in hating him.” He spits the last word like it’s a poison dart, vicious and mocking. Phil is staring at Tommy, eyes wide and something unreadable in them. Tommy can only look for a moment before letting his gaze climb back up to Dream.

“I don’t hate him,” Tommy says, and he watches Dream’s expression drop. “Not like I did.”

Dream sighs. He sighs as though Tommy’s just asked the stupidest question and he’s disappointed, and it makes his shoulders draw inwards and brace for a hit. “Well,” he says after a long, open silence. “I love you, Tommy. I love you.” He pauses. “But I can’t let you

ruin this plan. I'll finish the job now, if a little late. And yes, it'll break me, but I'll do it if I have to."

"Don't," Tommy rasps. He lifts his sword and holds it high. "I'll— I'll fight you, bitch."

"Oh, Tommy," Dream says, cooing, soft, gentle. "It was always going to end this way. Dream and Tommy against the world. Against each other, I guess."

Tommy supposed he was right. This was inevitable, wasn't it?

"You're a liar," Tommy tells him through the cotton in his throat, "and— and a cheat, and an awful person, and a hypocrite, and—"

"And you love me?" Dream asks, hopeful.

"No," Tommy spits. "Never again."

It's a lie. It's a gorgeous, sunset-colored lie, shades of mauve and indigo and clementine and lavender. It's a lie fueled by regret and a palm-shaped bruise on a cheekbone, a decade's worth of harsh words in his ear and a lie fueled by other lies. Secrets that were never true, reports that were forged. Stories that were told and hugs that were given freely, gentle hands brushing his hair back and wiping his tears away with just the pads of a thumb.

It is a quiet lie, but Dream doesn't call him out on it. He just tightens his grip on his sword and sighs.

"Well," he says. "I learned to love you. Guess that means anything's possible. My sunshine." He smiles, shaking his head as he does and stepping forward past Phil. "My Tommy. They've ruined you."

"You ruined me," Tommy gasps, and his breaths are coming quick and untidy but he can't panic now, not when Dream is advancing on him with certainty keeping his pace light.

"Only at the end," Dream tells him. "And everyone who witnessed it except me will be dead soon, so why does it matter? I'm the monster in your eyes, that's fine. I'll be the savior in everyone else's. I'm doing what has to be done, Tommy. I'm doing what you can't do. I'm sorry."

"No, you're not," Tommy says sharply, and Dream tilts his head.

"No?" he asks. Then, he turns, eyeing the emperor with a critical eye. "Fine. I'll kill him first. It'll be a good final lesson for you to learn, having to watch." Dream turns to face Phil, glancing over his shoulder at Tommy. "Shame you couldn't be there for the Empress."

"No—" Tommy gasps, and Phil opens his mouth and leans away, back from the sword, eyes iced over.

"Tommy, he's bluff—"

And then Dream strikes.



Tommy watches the sword come down in slow motion. As though he's underwater and the whole entire world is above him, cut off by a shimmering barrier of light and refraction. He watches, the lantern light around them glinting off the edge of Dream's sword, coming down as though the very air itself has turned to honey. He is suspended in time, watching Dream smile and Phil lean back, twisting his body and closing his eyes as though it will make the death blow come any slower. There is a moment then, a moment where Tommy is able to take a breath and watch with pupils blown wide.

(His body moves of its own accord, reacting by itself.)

And in a snap, everything is in real time once more. Tommy throws himself forward with a rush of panic echoing in his veins, fueled by adrenaline and pain as he shoves his body between Phil and the sword, raising his own blade against Dream's. They clash heavily, sparks flying as the metal drags against itself and the body of Dream's blade catches against Tommy's hilt. The force of it nearly sends him tumbling to the ground and he fights to stay upright on two feet, glaring at Dream with all the hatred he can muster as the other looks at him with a scowl. They break apart, swords ringing, and Dream lazily flips his around in his hand.

"So we're doing it this way?" he asks, and Tommy doesn't say a word, just stares at him as what he's about to do settles in. Dream sighs. "Fine. We'll do it *your* way."

It is nearing one in the morning on the summer solstice when Tommy faces Dream head-on, perhaps for the first time in his life. The second hit he takes is less intense than the first, but no less deadly. Dream is fighting to kill, and so Tommy fights back in the best way he knows how. He'd sparred with Dream, once upon a time, sunny summer days spent sweating away in the training yards of the palace in Caterwaul. A home, once. Brotherhood, laughing as they beat bruises into one another and then collapsed at the end of it, lingering amusement still pumping through their veins.

This isn't like that. This is desperation on both sides, a humbling disgrace and a hatred that runs bone-deep.

They know each other intimately now, and Tommy lets the anger fuel him. Dream killed his dad—the former king, or— Tommy doesn't even know what to call him now, much less what he should be feeling about it. So he lets the anger redirect and funnels it towards Dream, fighting offensively when he can. If Dream's trying to kill him, he can at least return the favor.

Feet dancing over stone, twirling swords and close contact. The stink of hot breath against his face and more sparks when they clash, a delicately balanced dance. Dream feints to the left and Tommy takes it, cuts littering his arms and legs as Dream taunts him, but he gets in a few good hits of his own that seem to do nothing. Dream is wearing armor, glistening with runes that spell out strength and protection. He isn't. Tommy is woefully underprepared, but he fights and he tries his fucking best.

They circle one another, backing off just for a moment to each catch their breath before lunging once more. Dream twirls and uses his armor to his advantage, but Tommy is lighter and therefore quicker, dodging the huge swings of his sword with delicate footwork. He's

practiced— and he’s fought Dream thousands of times before this. He knows how he moves, how he fights, but he can hardly land a hit on him. Cuts begin to litter his body— slashes against the soft flesh of his arms and one good hit on his calf that leaves him limping and blood pouring down his leg at an alarming rate. He doesn’t let it slow him down; he pushes himself up and delivers a similar blow to Dream, aiming for the spots in the cracks of his armor plates. He knows from a soft grunt of pain that his aim has hit true, and when he pulls his sword back from Dream’s knee it’s stained with red. Both of them are tiring— fighting is hard and fast work, but Tommy can’t afford to let himself lose.

He loses, he dies. Tommy does *not* want to die— he’s only just found reason to live, hasn’t he?

“Give up,” Dream grunts through gritted teeth. Tommy stares at him and shakes his head mutely. “Give up!”

“I’m not scared of you,” he says, although his entire body argues for the opposite. He is terrified of this Dream. They clash again, the sound of metal ringing through his ears like bells as they throw each other off balance.

At the last moment, Dream tips his blade. It dips, catching the hilt of Tommy’s, and in one fluid movement, wrenches it from his grasp. It goes flying through the air, clattering to the floor feet away, out of Tommy’s reach. He falters, weaponless, and Dream bares his teeth in a feral grin. Tommy takes a step back, ready to bolt, but Dream’s quicker than him— he rushes forward, one hand on Tommy’s shoulder and a foot hooking around his leg, slamming him to the ground so hard he sees stars. Light bursts in his eyes, the wind knocked out of him as he wheezes desperately. A hand keeps him down, pinning him by the shoulder and then by the base of his neck. Tommy scrabbles at Dream’s gloved fingers, blinking the black dots out of his vision and opening his mouth to plead. He doesn’t get the chance. Dream’s teeth are bared above him, the hot stink of breath across his face, and he presses the very tip of his blade against Tommy’s neck.

“I win,” Dream says, panting hard and gloating in the kill. Tommy winces as spittle hits his face, cringing backwards into an immovable floor. He has nowhere to go. He is trapped.

Tommy does not want to die.

Desperately, he stares at the grinning face above him, blind to who it is. Gone is the man who raised him, who put his nightmares to rest and advised him with a gentle hand and voice. Gone is the man who Tommy called a brother, once, who Tommy had placed all his trust in. In his place is a monster— one that will haunt Tommy’s afterlife. Nightmares are no longer an option— the sword is tight against his neck and the blade is sharp. Dream’s elbow shifts and his arm moves forward, pushing the sword along with it.

It breaks skin.

Hot blood splashes across Tommy’s face, thick and dripping.

He watches in horror as the sharp end of his own discarded blade is forced through the front of Dream’s throat, blood pouring from his mouth, from the wound. The smile is still on his face as he falls— shifting to the side, fingers going lax on the handle of his own sword,

loosening up around Tommy's neck, the pressure lifting from Tommy's legs as Dream slumps to the side.

Hurricanes are supposed to be *loud*.

Tommy is surprised by how quiet Dream falls, how the soft thump of his body against the ground is muted. How his blood bleeds red like any other person's, dripping across the stone as a horrible gurgle rises from the man's throat. He gurgles absently, and Tommy stares at his eyes widen and then relax, hands stuttering up to his own throat for a moment as he bleeds, bleeds, bleeds. And then, as though someone has cut all the cords connected to his puppet limbs, he goes limp. The light in his eyes— as deranged and maniacal and desperate as it was— disappears. Fear lingers, and then slowly, that drains away too.

The rattling sound of his breathing stops.

Philza stands above Tommy, hands outstretched from where they'd been grasping the hilt of Tommy's sword. The very one now impaling— now—

Tommy turns to the side and retches, spitting blood and bile out of his mouth as terror and shock wrack his body. He curls up, hands instinctively curling around his middle as he shivers. The only sound now is Phil's hard breathing, and Tommy's choked sobs.

"Tommy," Philza breathes, and he does not pull his hands away when Tommy flinches from his touch. "Tommy, are you alright, did you—"

"I'm sorry," Tommy gasps, shifting onto his knees as Philza holds his shoulders tight. He tries to worm away from his grip. When it doesn't work, he simply drops his head and bows his back, showing him, trying to prove to Phil that he is sorry. "Please, I'm so sorry—"

"Tommy," Phil says, and his voice is quiet. The rope on his wrists have been sawed through, limp strands hanging from his hands as they squeeze Tommy's shoulders. "Breathe with me. In and out."

Why is he not fuming? Tommy is expecting another sword to be at his neck, furious blue eyes to be condemning him to death. Philza surely wants the kill for himself— it's why he saved Tommy from Dream, isn't it? He killed Dream—

He killed Dream.

Tommy's gaze flicks back to the body now limp on the floor, blood still pooling as the body cools, and he breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth. Phil's voice is calm, exhausted, and yet he's confident. He holds himself with a presence that is hard to ignore.

"You here?" Phil asks a minute later, when Tommy's breathing has calmed down slightly and his eyes have been pulled away from Dream's body. He stares at the floor between them instead, shoulders shaking.

"I'm sorry," he pleads again. Phil hasn't killed him yet, but the blow must be coming. The drag back to reality. The Emperor just wants him present in the moment; he wants him to

know the weight of his sins. Tommy sinks as low to the floor as he can, pressing his forehead into the stone, ignoring the smell of death and copper permeating the room.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, and again, and again. He is begging for his life here, and he knows it. He was the one to plan this, he was the one to put it into motion, he was the one who conspired— it is his fault. “Please, Phil, please, Your Highness—” he chokes on his own words, tears spilling over again. “Forgive me, Philza, I didn’t— I had no idea— I am— this is my fault—”

“Tommy,” Philza says quietly. He demands attention. Tommy raises his head to stare at his chin, the scruff and dried blood there. He doesn’t dare look him in the eyes. “Where is my son?”

*Wilbur. My son.* Tommy chokes back his panic in order to answer.

“I left him in his room.” The words paint the room in a dark moment, but he’s quick to lighten it once more. “I didn’t hurt him, Your Highness, please—”

“And Techno?”

“Ranboo went to warn him, Your Majesty, I— I’m so sorry—” He’s ugly crying now, snot and tears leaking from his nose as he sits there, staring miserably at Philza’s chin. He can’t see the expression on the man’s face. He doesn’t know if he wants to. Phil is sighing, quiet and long, and from what Tommy can see of him he knows his shoulders are relaxing.

And then Tommy is being hugged.

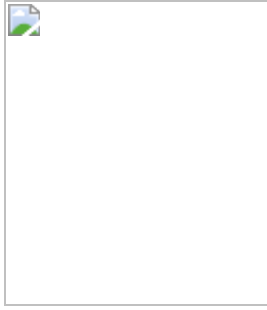
Phil’s hands are warm on his shoulders, gripping the back of his shirt tightly. Tommy stiffens— he is not expecting this. He’s not expecting Philza’s voice to be choked on it’s own accord, he’s not expecting to be tucked under Phil’s chin and hands to cradle him close.

“It’s okay,” the emperor is saying, that soft, secret side of him that only those closest to him get to see. “Tommy, it’s okay. It’s okay. It’s over.”

“Please forgive me,” Tommy gasps into his shoulder, sucking in air like a fish out of water. Philza just grips him tighter.

“It’s okay,” he continues to say, whispering the phrase over and over until Tommy’s head sinks down, until he’s buried his nose into Phil’s shoulder and can only smell a note of pine and ink. “It’s over,” Phil promises, hands running up and down Tommy’s spine, sitting there and pulling Tommy into his lap until there is no more water in his body to cry out. Until the snot has dried and cracked on his face, until Tommy is silent and the room is similarly so. Phil’s platitudes echo off the walls— “It’s okay. You’re alright. I’m okay. Everyone is okay, alright? Kristin is safe, I am safe, you are... you’re safe. You’re okay.

You’re okay.”



Somewhere in the middle of all the chaos, someone has found a white sheet to place over Dream's upper torso.

He stares, unseeing, for a long time as people file in and out of the room, voices echoing. Techno bursts into the room in a wave of fury and blood, *alive*, roaring Phil's name. Wilbur arrives at some point after that, bruised and face bloody. He sits on the opposite side of the room as Tommy. Tommy is in trouble. He knows he is, and yet, no chains find their way around his wrists. No one questions him when he steps away from Philza's side and sinks to his knees beside an unmoving, covered-up body, careful to avoid the rapidly congealing pool of blood that emanates from it.

He doesn't see much of what's going on around him, though. He knows they're talking about him, Tubbo and Ranboo giving their input as well as they stand by Techno's side. He has no idea where Sapnap and George are, or where Purpled and Punz went. Eret is here, but Karl and Quackity are missing. Tommy sits beside Dream and just waits.

Eventually, someone approaches him. He's in the middle of a prayer when Kristin sinks down beside him, her skirts billowing until she smooths a hand over them and avoids the blood just as Tommy had. She's *alive*, blessedly, in her nightclothes, a robe wrapped around her middle and hair long and loose, as though she'd woken frantically or been called from bed in a rush. Tommy glances to the side, but doesn't stop his prayer for her. He just whispers, whispers until it's done. And then he says one more prayer for thanks that Kristin is alive, just because he can. He can see the way she smiles, wry and tired.

She doesn't say anything for a while. Just sits with him.

Then: "Who was he?"

Tommy glances over properly now, but she's looking at Dream's body, not him. "What?" he asks.

"Who was he?" she asks again.

"Dream Innes," Tommy says. "My— brother. Not by blood," he's quick to clarify.

"No," Kristin says gently. "Who *was* he?"

Tommy looks down at the white sheet, edges stained red, and shuts his eyes. "I don't know anymore," he says, and that is the truth.

At some point, Dream had become unrecognizable. The longer Tommy thinks on it, the farther back it goes. He can't remember a time in the recent past in which Dream had been his Dream, the one who had held him when he cried and wiped back tears borne of nightmares.

"I'm sorry," Kristin says. Tommy inhales, and then leans his head hesitantly over. Slumping, sliding, until finally he is resting against her shoulder and blinking back tears.

"I'm sorry," he echoes back. Then, "I'm glad you're alive."

"I'm glad you're alive too," she says, and her chuckle is warm.

"How are you alive?" he asks, and she brings an arm up around his shoulders and takes his hand in her own, squeezing their fingers together.

"Phil told me to wait," she says. "In our room. Which I did, for about five minutes, before I finally gave up and met Techno halfway here. Ranboo was with him— he explained a lot."

"Did he tell you it was my fault?"

"...in a way."

"I'm sorry."

"Shush." Kristin's hand lets go of his own, reaching up to smooth his hair back. "Are you hurt?"

Tommy feels the sting of his leg, the bruises and cuts on every inch of him, the swelling at the base of his throat that will likely be purple fingerprints by tomorrow morning. One last mark from Dream. One last claim— one that will fade with time, as will they all. Slowly, he nods.

"I'll go find Ponk," Kristin murmurs, and when she moves away from him, squeezing his shoulder one last time, he is sad to feel her go. He watches her move across the room, and then turns his gaze away and finds Phil engrossed in a conversation with Techno, Ranboo and Tubbo standing there. Occasionally sharp bursts of voices can be heard from them, and Tommy glances one last look at Dream's unmoving corpse before he pushes himself up on shaky legs and starts to wobble over. Dried blood clings to his pant leg, and he limps, but as he gets closer their words become more and more audible.

"—said there were others," Technoblade is saying, voice stern. "How many?"

Tubbo glances around. "Uh. Six, I think."

"You think?" Technoblade asks, raising a brow. "Be specific."

"Six that I know of," Tubbo says, sounding impossibly frustrated. "Look, we tried to give up, okay? This wasn't Tommy's fault, it was Dream's idea—" Tommy clears his throat, cutting him off with a sharp noise. All of their heads snap to him; Technoblade's gaze is practically

murderous, and if Tommy wasn't in the throes of shock at the moment he thinks he might be scared. But he's not.

"No," he says. The silence that falls across the room is telling what they think of him. "It wasn't," he continues.

"Yes it was," Tubbo insists, and he's stubborn, Tommy will give him that. The look in his eye still has fight to it— fight for Tommy, fight for them. But Tommy...

Tommy doesn't want to fight anymore. He's so tired.

And so he tells the truth.

"It was my idea," he says plainly. "All of it. The coup, the bombs, everything. I suggested it to him and then we both planned it. It was my idea, though. I brought it up."

The room is deafening in its silence. Tommy stares around at the faces of the royal family and hopes to Prime they don't hate him. He would hate him. He hates himself.

"Well," Phil says after a moment, shutting his eyes briefly. Tommy waits for a death sentence, a final blow. The older man lets out a sigh of haggard air. "Well," he says again.

"It's not his fault—" Tubbo tries to speak up again, but he's silenced by a harsh glare from Technoblade. He falls silent, stepping back against Ranboo's side once more. Tommy stands alone, and he's not even scared.

They might kill him for this, and he's not scared. Technoblade sure looks like he's about to—he's still holding his sword even now, the edge coated with red that's quick to congeal. Wilbur is across the room still, sitting on the dais steps and watching with his chin resting on one fisted hand. His eyes are hooded. When Tommy looks his way, the other boy's gaze drops.

"This is... unprecedented," Phil finally says. Tommy translates: *I have no idea what to do with you.*

"I'm sorry," he says weakly. "I tried to turn it around. I didn't want it to happen."

"You *came up* with the idea," Technoblade points out.

"I was angry," Tommy says, which is no excuse, but it's an explanation. He lowers his head, trying hard not to choke on tears that are threatening to fall once more. "I know it's a lame thing to say, but I was. And I was upset, and everything seemed hopeless. I am— I'm *sorry*," he says again, sniffing on the word. "I was wrong and I'm sorry."

"Phil," Kristin says gently, coming up beside him and placing a hand on his shoulder. Her eyes are still warm, even now. He looks to her, and Tommy blinks in order to clear the fuzziness from his vision. "Can I speak with you?"

Phil pauses, and then nods. Technoblade stays where he is as they shift to the side of the room and begin conversing in low, muttered tones. Tommy is quiet— Ranboo shifts to sit,

long legs folding under him like a complicated contraption as Tubbo is pulled down along with him.

“Thirty-six,” Technoblade says. His voice is cold but emphatic.

“What?” Tommy asks, looking up.

“Thirty-six royal guards,” he repeats. “Dead.”

Tommy swallows. “I’m sorry,” he says for what feels like the hundredth time.

“Sorry won’t bring back those who are gone,” Technoblade says, and then his eyes turn to the unmoving body across the room. Tommy can’t look at it, not anymore, but he knows exactly where Technoblade is looking anyway. “Was he always with you?”

“Since I was a baby,” Tommy says quietly. “He— he killed my dad.”

Saying it out loud has the same effect as the sound of a crossbow firing. The air goes still between them. Technoblade raises a brow.

“They said it was an assassin,” he says slowly.

“It wasn’t,” Tommy tells him, shutting his eyes. His legs feel like jelly, but he keeps himself propped up anyways. “It was him.”

“Your plan would never have worked.”

“I know.”

“It would have failed, even if we had died. There are measures in place to keep something like this from happening.”

“I know.”

“You were doomed from the start. As was he.”

“For fuck’s sake, I *know*!” Tommy snaps, raising his head in order to glare at Techno. The older man has stepped forward and is only a few paces away now— Tommy looks up at him, a snarl on his lips. “I know it was doomed! I know it was stupid! You don’t have to tell me— I knew, and I did it anyways, because I was fucking desperate. Because you were all awful and I thought I had no other choice. But then you— then you weren’t awful, and my head was all— twisted ‘round, like a top. Like you’d stuffed fucking ribbons in my ears. And I didn’t want you dead anymore. ‘Cause I liked you. And that was just more ribbons.” Tommy takes one big, shuddering breath. “So. Yeah.”

Technoblade stares at him. Wilbur is looking at him too now, from across the room. Eventually, Techno sighs, and then slowly, sheaths his sword with the blood still clinging to it. “You’re a fool,” he says quietly.



“Maybe I am,” Tommy says. “But I tried to stop it. I did stop it.” He refuses to look at Dream’s body.

“We can’t trust you,” Techno says. Tommy just hangs his head and doesn’t bother to respond— he knows the trust they had been slowly building is gone, and they’re all back to square one. It’s a horrible, sinking feeling to acknowledge, but he does. It’s his fault.

Across the room, Wilbur is still silent.

Someone clears their throat— everyone goes quiet once more, and Phil is back, Kristin by his side. She gives Tommy a smile, but Phil’s face is stern. He looks at Tommy, and Tommy swallows hard.

“Treason is a crime normally punished by execution,” Phil says, and from somewhere to Tommy’s left Tubbo’s voice raises in protest. Phil turns and raises a hand— Tubbo quiets, and Tommy just watches. There is nothing but numbness in him now, dread rising and falling in waves. Phil turns back to him, hand lowering, his brow scrunched. “However,” he continues. “Due to the... unprecedented circumstances of this betrayal, I think some time to process and discuss is necessary. For all of us. I will be contacting the Vaults committees and the council, of course. And there will be punishment.” His eyes rake over Tommy to the rest of the captured coup crew. “For all of you.” His eyes flick back down, meeting Tommy’s gaze. They soften, ever-so-slightly. “But I do not think death is necessary, considering everything I witnessed today.”

Dream’s body is the unspoken elephant in the room. No one has commented on it thus far, and Tommy doubts his name will ever be spoken aloud again. No burial for him, no grave. Not that he deserves one— Tommy is the only person left to mourn him, and his prayers from earlier had been enough.

(He pretends like it doesn’t hurt, a raw, festering wound. He wonders if it’ll ever heal right, if at all. It’s just easier to pretend it doesn’t exist now, when he’s surrounded by people. Cover it up and hide the truth; there is no point in continuing to grieve when the person you thought you loved had been gone and buried for months already.)

Phil continues, “It’s late, and I believe we’ve had enough excitement. All of you will be escorted to rooms on the other side of the palace and put on house arrest— you are not to leave your room, or so much as open the door. Guards will be posted every five feet down that hall, and meals will be brought to you.” The faces around him are stony, but no one protests. Phil surveys them again. “Tomorrow, I’m going to call an emergency conference and you will all be dealt with according to the laws of the Continent at large.” His eyes land on Tommy then. “Or, at my discretion.”

Fucking brilliant. Tommy doesn’t bother scowling at him. The fight’s left him for tonight.

“Techno,” Phil says, and his voice lowers just slightly as he turns away, clearly not meant to be addressing the group anymore. “Can you arrange for them to be escorted down, separately please, there are enough rooms on the west side—” And Tommy tunes out, uninterested in the next stage of his imprisonment. He’s spent long enough being a war prisoner— he’s back at square one, a kid being dragged from his country once more. However this time, he’s

wracked with guilt. It doesn't take long for his leg to twinge enough to force him to sit, shuffling over to a clear spot of stone and watching guards file in and out of the room, some of them bloody, some of them clean. He sits, eyes half-shut as exhaustion threatens to overtake him.

And then, someone sits beside him.

His first thought is Ponk— he's expecting the doctor to come to treat his leg or various other injuries, but when he shifts slightly in order to glance over at the presence by his side, his entire body tenses.

Wilbur isn't looking at him. He's not even side-eyeing him, not even a little bit. His gaze is turned outwards, watching the movement of the guards with a dull sort of apathy that Tommy knows will be reflected in his own gaze. Neither of them say anything for a long, long moment. And then finally, Wilbur opens his mouth.

"I'm fucking pissed at you," he says. Tommy just blinks. Wilbur continues, "I thought we'd made progress. Friendly, you know?" His eyes turn to the floor. "Guess I was wrong."

"... I tried to stop it," Tommy says quietly. It's his only argument now. Wilbur scoffs.

"Yeah, far too late," he grunts. Tommy is struck by how much he looks and sounds like Philza in that moment, a look of disdain on his face, lips turned downwards in a scowl. His eyebrows are perpetually sad, a trait carried over from his father, and if it wasn't for his dark hair and eyes Tommy would think them pretty identical in looks and tone. "You've gone and ruined everything."

"You don't have to tell me," Tommy says, drawing his knees up to his chest and picking at a cuticle absently. He looks out, and meets Tubbo's gaze from across the room. The other boy nods at him, then gives a tiny wave. Tommy waves back. "I know."

"No," Wilbur says. "I don't think you do."

They both fall quiet. Tommy snuffles.

"Do you think," he starts quietly, and then rubs his nose. He starts again. "Do you think we would've known each other?" he asks. "If my parents hadn't died. And if the Cataclysm never happened, and we were just princes."

"Probably," Wilbur says, tone unreadable.

"Do you think we would've been friends?" Tommy asks. Wilbur still refuses to look at him, and he frowns. "Do you?"

"I'm so angry at you," Wilbur says, cutting him off and not answering Tommy's question. He supposes that's fair enough— it's an unfair question, pondering the unattainable parallel. They don't live in that universe. They live in this one, in the here and now. And yet, Tommy can't help but wonder; would they have been friends? Two princes raised side by side, best friends,

brothers, even. “It’s so unfair, what you did. Everything was nice, and now it’s not. It was selfish, Tommy. What you did? Was selfish.”

“I know,” Tommy says hoarsely. Wilbur sighs, long and loud.

“... thank you for not killing me,” he says after another second. “That was alright, at least.”

“I really didn’t want to,” Tommy admits, leaning his cheek on his knee and staring at Wilbur. The other boy finally breaks— he looks, turning his head to meet Tommy’s eyes. They stare at each other now, unflinching eye contact with that dull remainder of shock still lingering. Deep down, Tommy can see Wilbur’s anger, and above it, the tiredness that’s keeping him from expressing it. Tommy feels the same. They’re so similar, he marvels, and again he thinks about his question. If none of this had happened, and they had grown up friends— how different would it be?

“I don’t know if I can forgive you,” Wilbur tells him quietly, as though it’s a secret meant to be passed between them.

“Okay,” Tommy whispers back. His throat is dry, and yet he feels like crying.

“But,” Wilbur says. “I want to try, I think. Not right now. Maybe later.”

Tommy blinks back tears. “Okay,” he says again. Wilbur sits there, just looking at him for a long moment, and then pushes himself off the floor. Without another word to Tommy, he makes his way over to where his mother and father are. Tommy watches as he takes Kristin’s hand, says something to her, and then heads out of the Great Hall. The number of people here is dwindling; Ponk arrives at long last, without their mask and grumbling about the hour. They grumble more when looking over Tommy’s injuries, even though a healing potion and some bandages clean him right up. It doesn’t take away the ache in his soul, but at least his leg is mostly stitched back together.

The bruises around his neck turn a mottled green.

Ponk leaves, and the number of voices in the room keeps dwindling until finally, it’s just Philza, Technoblade, Kristin, a few guards, and Tommy. He waits, watching as the three of them converse in low tones across the room and occasionally glance over at him, or at the body a few meters beyond. Tommy is very tired. He wants to go to bed.

Eventually, even Technoblade and Kristin leave the emperor to linger by the door. Phil is the only one left, and it’s only a minute or so before he walks over to Tommy, shoes clicking on the cobbles and echoing around them. Tommy draws his knees tighter to his chest, and waits.

Phil settles down beside him, in the spot Wilbur had vacated not too long ago.

“So,” he says, and Tommy bites his inner cheek. The death sentence is coming. He knows it. “... I’d... like to ask you about Dream.”

Right. Kristin snitched, then. Typical.

“He was my brother,” Tommy rasps out methodically.

“No,” Phil says, cutting him off. “No, I mean— I heard everything. When you two spoke.” Oh, right. Phil had been there that whole time, listening in on their dirty laundry and watching it come out to hang and dry. Tommy shrugs, as though Phil hasn’t seen him just now with his very soul laid bare on the floor. “And I think— *we* think that you haven’t been in a good place for a very long time, Tommy.”

“Who’s the ‘we’?” Tommy queries dryly. “You and the empress? Or is the general in on it too?”

“All of us,” Phil says gently. “Tommy, what I saw— what you said, I don’t... it doesn’t make me inclined to believe any of this is your fault, in the end.”

“But it was,” Tommy says, turning to look at him head-on now. “All mine.”

“No,” Phil says, shaking his head lightly. “It wasn’t.”

“It *was*—” Tommy starts to insist, but Phil interrupts before he can properly whine about it.

“Tommy,” he says. Then, quieter: “You and I both know it wasn’t and was at the same time. And while we know that, and Kristin and Techno will listen to me, others won’t be so insightful. We were here to see it, and they weren’t. Convincing them will be a fight.”

Tommy just shrugs. Phil sighs.

“You won’t ever be king again,” he tells Tommy, and it’s like that has been the anvil over his head, just waiting to drop. Held up only by frayed rope and hope, a last wish that Tommy knows will never be fulfilled. He will never be king again. He will never sit on his throne and wear his crown, he will never live in the palace at Caterwaul and be utterly, truly home. He gave up the right to his kingship the moment he suggested this doomed coup, no matter how much he didn’t want to admit it. The anvil comes crashing down, and Tommy shuts his eyes to avoid seeing the collateral damage.

“I’ll fight for you,” Phil says quietly. “But you can’t hold a position of power like that again, not after this.”

“I know,” Tommy says, after what feels like an eternity of silence.

“I don’t want your life to be miserable, though,” Phil tells him, and Tommy snuffles. “I just— what Dream said to you, he was wrong.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Tommy mutters, lifting an arm to wipe again at his face and not caring when his already-dirty sleeve comes away with a long streak of snot. “He was right about so many things.”

“No,” Phil says. “I heard what he said to you,” he explains. Tommy looks away, rubbing his open palm down his pant leg. “And he was wrong. He *did* need you, Tommy. That’s what broke him in the end. How badly he needed you, how much he was struggling to understand why.”

“Yeah, but why?” Tommy asks, hating how his voice cracks as he asks it. He turns back to look at Phil, eyes burning and mouth quivering as he coughs back a sob. “Why would he need me? He said it himself, he could just kill me and be king and he’d be fine, he’d be—you’d be—”

“He needed you,” Phil says again, gently, so, so soft. “Because he loved you.”

“He had a shit way of showing it,” Tommy chokes out, and Phil laughs wryly.

“Yeah,” he says. “He did.”

“Love isn’t supposed to *hurt*, ” Tommy whispers. Then, “I never figured that out before now.”

“Mmm.” Phil hums, noncommittal. They both stay quiet for a little while, as though Phil’s not quite sure what to say at that. Tommy doesn’t blame him. It was kind of a depressing thing to say. But after a couple minutes of pondering silence, he speaks up again. “I want you to stay here with us,” Phil proposes. “Like you have been. More restrictions, but less at the same time.”

“Not Cormorant?” Tommy asks, thinking of the remote island fort. He’d kind of been assuming that’s where they’d throw him. Phil shrugs.

“Nah,” he says. “Mate, I think you’ve learned your lesson.”

Tommy gnaws on his lip. “Maybe,” he says. “Maybe, yeah.”

“If you haven’t by now, I think we’ve got bigger issues,” Phil says and Tommy manages to crack a smile then— just a small one, bare and empty of anything but sarcastic humor.

He’s not going to die. Phil doesn’t even want to get *rid* of him. Tommy thinks he’s going to have to re-earn their trust, and he’s sure it will take time. But if he’s never going to be king again (and oh, thinking that very phrase stings, hurts his very *soul* ) then Tommy has plenty of time. He looks over at Phil and finds the emperor already watching him, glacier meeting ocean.

"I'd like to start over," Phil says. "You and me. Us. All of us." He gets up, squatting by Tommy on his toes and holds his hand out, palm facing inwards, face serious as he crouches. "My name is Phil Watson-Soot," he says carefully. Tommy stares at him, between his eyes and his hand, and then blinks.

Gently, he reaches out to take it, warm hand meeting warm hand.

"Tommy," he says hesitantly.

"It's nice to meet you, Tommy," Phil says, and when he smiles it's like watching the sun rise in the morning over the mountains, welcoming in a new day.

## Chapter End Notes

.... hey, guys :)

so, first things first, you might've noticed the chapter count went up! that's right, there's an epilogue!!!!!!!!!!!! i will be posting that sometime this week/next weekend- hopefully you guys will like it!

on a more serious note, though, thank you. thank you for reading my story- when i first brainrotted this idea with some friends in a discord server almost nine months ago, i never thought it would come to be this. this is my longest fic i've written to date, and definitely the one i'm most proud of. i never could've done it without crow, mads, spud, TEM god tem my beloved- and all of you guys, leaving comments and screaming in my dms and on twitter. thank you SO much for reading and coming along this journey with tommy and me.

and, fear not. this won't be the only foray into the cataclysm universe- i plan on writing some other stuff in-universe that'll come out now and again, so if you're interested make sure to subscribe to me or the series!!!!

thank you. thank you!!! thank you!!!!!!!!!!!!!! i love you all, and i'll see you this week for the epilogue<3

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ART FORTHIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#)AND [MADS](#)!

official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

# epilogue - these sunrise colors of my life

## Chapter Summary

twc: n/a

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Morning comes in long stretches of light, a pinkish-red sunrise and cascades of color passing through the window and onto the floor. Tommy's sheets are white and cottony, his blankets cool in the mild warmth that lingers even at night. Wakefulness comes in stages; an open eye here, a stretch there. His toes crack and his fingers scrabble at sheets, tugging them up to his nose as he watches the sunlight encroach on his bed, as steadfast as the tide.

By the time it reaches his fingertips, lighting the green canopy above him aflame, Tommy is fully awake.

He slips out of the fluffy linens carefully, bare feet quiet against the marble floors of his bedroom. No one has come to wake him yet or bring him breakfast, and there's no need for anyone to poke the fire. It is still disgustingly early, and so he moves across the room to sit in front of his mirror, the glass surface reflecting the open room around him. Various rugs are scattered along the floor in every color and texture imaginable, his green canopy spilling across the floor like rivers of cloth. His sheets are rumpled and the wide windows on either side of his bed and along the other way all closed, their white gauzy curtains still. Tommy pauses by one, and then opens it to let in the morning air. It's damp, and smells of salt. Outside, the sun rises over limestone rooftops and in the distance, Tommy can see the golden dome of one of the palace sanctuaries. The sun reflects off of it, a brilliant sphere of color.

Caterwaul's sunrises remain the most beautiful he's ever seen.

With fresh air circulating, he shifts away from the window and finishes his trek to his mirror, stopping in front for a moment. Red wrinkles on his shoulders and face betray the good night's rest he'd gotten last night, and Tommy blinks sticky gunk out of his lashes as he yawns and shifts from foot to foot.

He studies the reflection in the mirror, his hair kept medium length, golden curls he's grown into. His face is clean and smooth, an effect of the oil he slathers on each morning, a ritual he's known since he was only fifteen. His eyes stare back at him- the same color of the sky when the sun rises and the day is cloudless. There are many things he has to do today; a meeting with councillors, a delegation to greet, family to welcome with open arms. He's got responsibilities. Yet, looking in the mirror, Tommy can't help but want to do anything *but* . And so, in a moment of (perhaps childish) rationale, he makes his choice.

Before anyone can come to wake him, Tommy dresses himself. Brushes his fingers through his hair and tightens his belt and sash, wearing the least ostentatious outfit he has in his wardrobe. He doesn't technically *need* to sneak out, but as he shakes the last gooey tendrils of sleep that cling to him off, Tommy decides a little irresponsibility can't hurt. He puts on his most practical pair of shoes and then heads back over to the open window; it is a ritual he has done many times before, glancing one last time over his shoulder and swearing softly under his breath as he scurries back to his desk for a moment to grab his coin purse. Now he's ready, hitching one foot up onto the window sill and pushing the glass panes open wider.

Below him is a significant drop— not nearly as daunting as it had been when he was eight and then eleven and then thirteen. But even now he hesitates for a moment before shoving himself off the sill. The gap is fairly small, about a three or four foot leap, and Tommy's fingers scramble to catch purchase on the limestone wall he lands on. But he's made it before and now he just steadies himself, swinging a leg over the top and glancing either way down the top of the wall. No guards make themselves known, so he stands up and carefully balances, making his way down the stones.

The guard tower at the end isn't empty, but Tommy just sneaks through anyways and the men in armor there don't say anything, just side eye him with knowing grins. He hops down the last few steps of the spiral staircase, throwing open the tower door and making his way out to the outer wall, and from there he just leaves through a small guarded doorway, again bypassing the stationed men with a salute.

Once he gets past the first street, Tommy relaxes, letting out a breath.

The streets of Caterwaul greet him kindly, an early-morning mist rising off the stones that make up its street, people starting their days by throwing open shutters and calling out in welcoming voices. His city. His *home*. He leans his head back and inhales the salty air as he meanders down the wooden pathways on the side of the road, tucking his fingers into his pockets. Little multicolored flags hang from doorways and windows, fluttering in the breeze as he passes, decorations ready for a parade procession that will be making their way into the city today. It's quiet in this residential area, but Tommy's studied maps and walked these roads since he was tiny and he makes his way down to the *sheva* before it gets too much busier.

*Sheva*, or as Tommy thinks of them most often: market. On this bright and sunny morning the fish market is already crowded, having been open since before sunrise already. The river cascades past in a rush of water, the sound lost beneath the shouting voices of barkers and hagglers, the sour smell of a fresh catch lingering in the air as nets are hauled onto the slats of the sheva . The whole market is on these docks, and whenever Tommy looks down he can see water beneath him through the cracks between boards. He's not here for fish, though— he's just passing through, waiting for a moment as the bridge is shuttered across on a series of blasting skivs until it's complete once more. It had been pulled back to allow a fishing vessel through, and as he crosses with a few other pedestrians, Tommy tips his head back to stare up at the billowing white sails, the dark specks of sailors clinging to them like fleas, so high they could kiss the blue sky.



On the other side of the Angwat river is the proper market. Sure, fish are cool, but Tommy's not about to eat raw fish for breakfast. Their eyes freak him out. He can still smell them too on this side of the water, but the wares that decorate these stalls are much more in tune to his desires— cooked foods, baked goods, cloth, spices, ice, flowers, everything. This sheva is built over water too— they all are, and they're all rickety. It doesn't bother him.

A few minutes later, with his coin purse a bit lighter, Tommy munches on a pastry and slowly works his way around. His face is known but not too well-known, and the anonymity is wonderful so early in the morning. He keeps to himself, offering kind words to shopkeepers whenever he stops to browse and at one point, Tommy takes a break and just leans against a small railing, finishing his breakfast and watching the boats come in, the bridges retracting and compressing before sliding out once more to cross the waves.

His city, so lively.

Not... technically his city. Semantics.

Tommy stares at the golden rooftop of the palace in the distance, surrounded by red tile roofs and bricks, and tears his teeth into the pastry he'd bought. He's not king— never will be king again, but despite the turmoil that had brought him in the beginning he thinks he's found peace now with the idea.

He can remember the days after the coup with startling vividness. He'd almost expect it to be fuzzy or at least fade with time, but almost ten years have passed and he can recall every moment with stark detail.

He can remember hardly getting any sleep for one— constantly on edge, working until dawn to fix everything that had gone terribly, terribly wrong. He hadn't left Phil's side for the most part, the emperor himself keeping a watchful eye over him as they summoned the council of Libra and committees of the Vaults, shameful letters that left Tubbo and Ranboo with their heads and eyes cast downward. Tommy has never felt embarrassment and shame like that before. Not just due to his actions, but because of what Philza had witnessed.

He'd seen and heard everything. Watched as Dream hurt him, forced to sit there as the story about Tommy's parentage leaked out of lips like poison. Despite this, the secret of Tommy's parentage had seemingly died with Dream. Phil had heard, yes, but in quiet tones in the days following the failed coup, he had instructed Tommy to say nothing.

*It will not be worth the pain,* he had said, one of Tommy's hands clenched between his own. His eyes had been even, searching Tommy's face for something he hadn't been sure of. *I will tell no one, and you will take it to your grave. The people don't need to know. You still have your mother's blood, and that is all you need.*

Tommy had agreed. Phil had been right— it wasn't worth the pain. The people didn't need another scandal on top of a war, and any number of bastards could try and claim his throne out from under him if there was any uncertainty to his lineage. Rumors he had once thought were funny had become useful, and while Tommy knows he's nothing special, the public still whispers about a world-ending, cataclysmic power he might hold. Better for them to speculate on that instead of his parentage. It's easier to combat. Easier to hear.

He doesn't hate his mother for it, strangely. Nor his father— the man had known and not cared. His father (and a father he was even without blood relation) had loved him, which is all Tommy could ever ask for.

That was the only secret they kept, though. Everything else had finally been out in the open.

It was almost a weight off of Tommy's shoulders. He testified in his own trial— he talked for nearly forty-five minutes straight, detailing Dream's confession of killing his father, explaining their relationship and answering questions about his treatment and the manipulation he'd put Tommy through. He'd resisted that argument for a while, telling anyone who could listen that he hadn't been entirely manipulated. His hand hadn't been forced to start the coup— he'd just been angry. Angry over the loss of his kingdom: and so he'd made a stupid choice.

The council members (minus Ranboo) and committees had heard his testimony with curious gazes and unsure demeanors. They'd recessed to discuss, and Tommy can remember chewing his nail beds down to bleeding sores as he'd watched them talk from across the room. He hadn't been allowed to listen in, only watch as Phil had gestured, Wilbur stoic at his side.

(Wilbur had taken it hard. After the night in the throne room, he didn't speak to Tommy for a long, long time.)

But they'd come back after talking, and Hannah had stepped up to the spot where he was standing on the courtroom dais. Tommy couldn't help the way his hands shook then, leveling his gaze with hers and watching her eyes narrow. The silence had held unspoken tension, filling the room and making Tommy unable to breath.

She'd shaken her head slightly, pushed a braid away from her face and back into the bundle of delicate hair art on her head, and held up the paper that held his entire future. Tommy can remember the words almost exactly.

"Thomas Innes-Innit," she had said, voice crisp and clear. "In accordance with ancient traditions of the Continent, we have come together to decide the fate of someone who has grievously been wronged and wronged in turn. Your actions this past fortnight have been telling to your temperament as both friend and as a ruler. In these times of uncertainty, brutality is unfortunately expected. But to have this brutality turned on some of our own is unacceptable." She had paused then and taken a breath, and Tommy had thought: *this is it*.

"But," Hannah had continued, "due to the testimonies we have heard today, and the very impassioned insistence from His Majesty Emperor Philza, the punishment we have agreed upon is not as severe as tradition would dictate."

And Tommy had nearly collapsed. True, his punishment was bad, ("Thomas Innes-Innit, by the power granted to us in this land by His Majesty, we formally revoke any Prime-given right of yours to the throne of the Opus Isles.") but Tommy was not dead. That had been a wonderful start.

His punishment was simple: he was to remain in Raven's Flight with Phil and his family, to live there with them or whatever Phil decided was best. Whether that be a lifetime of exile on

Cormorant or otherwise, that was up to them. Tommy's right to the throne had been thoroughly decimated, and the Isles remained in Empire hands.

Tommy learned a few things about the emperor those following days. He learned he was a vicious man— words would spill from him like knives if they had to, as though he was a man with nothing to lose. Or perhaps a man who had just realized he had *everything* to lose. Tommy stayed by his side as new treaties were drawn, new land borders erected, and a new title added to the end of Philza's name. Phil was a warrior through and through. His diplomatic tendencies bordered on intimidation tactics at best, and Kristin often served as his foil around tables of irate nobles. Wilbur took after his father, Tommy realized three days in after the crown prince had snapped at a duke. He'd always thought Wilbur had been more like his mother, but now he can see both of them in him. Clearly, Phil can too, because he swelled with pride whenever Wilbur had brought something tactful to the table.

In the end, it had taken months. Tommy remembers every day of that loss with clarity.

He remembers what came after, too.

He hadn't been a prisoner for long. No, instead he had become a ward under Phil, and he spent summers in Cormorant and winters in the capital.

(He didn't deserve the kindness they showed him, especially after what he'd done. Technoblade warmed up after a while, especially after his testimony. Phil and Kristin were stern but as compassionate as ever. Wilbur took the longest. Again, Tommy didn't blame him. Phil told him one night over tea that what Tommy had said in the Great Hall had been right: love wasn't supposed to hurt.

It had been then, a cup of goldenrod tea in hand, that Tommy had understood what love was meant to be.)

Love is him now, standing on the edge of a saltwater river and watching the boats come in. Love is thinking about the procession he'll attend today, and love had been written into the lines of the decree that had declared Tommy steward of Caterwaul when he turned 21. He hadn't deserved it. He still doesn't. But Phil had gifted him the title and with it, a chance to go *home* .

Home is lovely. He'd been eighteen the first time he'd seen it since leaving when he was a prisoner of war, and she had shone so brilliantly upon his arrival. He had known things would be different when he arrived, but by some grace of Prime, his room in the palace had been intact.

Walking through it had been like confronting a ghost.

He slept there anyways, had the walls re-papered and rugs dragged in to cover the cold floor he'd spent hours kneeling on as a child as punishment. He hung paintings on the walls, brought in a new bed and new furniture, and had remade the space to reflect who he was now.

He is a son of the Empire now.

(Not *officially*, you know. That would be a lot of paperwork and hardship and Tommy promising not to kill Wilbur to get the throne. He'd already tried that anyway. Spoiler alert: it didn't work. But he *is* a son of the Empire now despite there being no papers.)

He'd grown up in Caterwaul. But he'd grown up in Raven's Flight too.

Prime, he'd been so young when he'd left.

Tommy watches the river until he hears horns, grand instruments from down the way. The sheva has slowly filled up with people, bustling as they buy their food and haggle and live. Tommy isn't king, but he is steward, and he loves his fucking job. These people are still his people, and the crooning tones of his native language are beloved to his tongue. He spots the boat down the river as it comes in and as children and adults alike rush to the railings that keep the sheva boxed in, staring and waving frantically with wide smiles as the ship laden with Empire flags makes its way down the waves. He can't quite make out any figures on deck, but he knows they're there.

His family has arrived.

Pushing off of the railing and letting a child take his spot, Tommy starts to work his way down to the section of docks that once served as the royal sector, and now functions as a luxury dock. He steps off the rickety boards of the sheva and onto the cobble streets, pastel-colored houses surrounding him as he weaves through people and ignores any looks thrown his way. Yes, they recognize him. But no one will say anything.

A girl hands him a flower anyways— a drooping iris, one he tucks into his collar and wears with a grin.

The people had been wary of his return, and rightfully so. But they did not attempt to hide Dream's influence— news spread, and spread quickly. Tommy had gone from hated to pitied to adored in quick succession. Their former king had been manipulated since birth. He recovers now under the Empire's flag and tells his people in a carefully crafted letter how this had been a liberation, a war that would free the people of the Isles, even by coincidence.

*It is easy to place blame on a dead man*, Wilbur had said, a complaint clear on his face. *Shouldn't he face consequences?*

*There is no better consequence here than the sin of living with a lie*, Technoblade had argued back in Tommy's depressing defense. *Especially one that could crumple in our palms if we so wished.*

And that had been the end of that.

Now, as Tommy roams the streets, people respect him. He'll never be king, but he is home, and as he approaches the luxury docks he can see the gangplank come down and a few servants scurry off.

Tommy manages to make his way onto the dock without issue, and he waits as carriages pull up, as people file off the boat. He's impatient, bouncing on his toes a bit as he waits, but

eventually—

Technoblade comes over the top of the gangplank, and works his way down. He's not in armor. Tommy waits for him to get to the bottom and back on solid ground before he takes off like a shot, throwing himself forward and flinging himself onto Techno without hesitation. The older man grunts and squirms, but Tommy doesn't let go. After a moment Techno stills, and then brings his arms up around his shoulders in turn.

"You were supposed to meet us at the palace," he says lightly, breath warm on Tommy's ear. Tommy just laughs.

"I missed you," he complains, and then pulls away from the hug to look at him. Crow's eyes line his face, a layer of salt and pepper scruff on his chin. "I figured I'd come and meet you early."

Technoblade looks over his shoulder, and then around the docks. He raises a brow. "By yourself?" he queries.

"I wanted breakfast by the river," Tommy admits. "Alone."

"You will be the death of me," Techno grunts. Tommy grins, and before Techno can take back the slip—

"I tried," he points out. It earns him a slap on the shoulder, hard enough for one knee to buckle a bit.

"You are the cause of my gray hairs," Techno amends.

"Of which you have many," Tommy points out. "Not nearly as many as Phil, of course, because he is older than you. So old, in fact, that I fear any day now—"

"You fear what?" Phil's voice comes across the salt-tinged air, amused.

Tommy grins. "I fear any day now I will be forced to endure Wilbur's reign, and that would be truly horrific."

Wilbur appears over his father's shoulder, and Tommy breaks away to go and hug Phil. His arms are warm, tight around him for a moment before they let go. Wilbur smiles and draws him into a hug as well, laughing at the way Tommy tries to get on his tiptoes even now to try and be taller.

"You're such a child," he teases.

"I am *not*," Tommy fires back.

"Boys," Kristin chides. Tommy's cheeks hurt from smiling as she descends the gangplank, skirts rustling, hair up off her neck in an elegant bun. "Please try not to tease the *moment* we step off the ship."

"He was being a bitch," Tommy points out.

“Watch your language,” Wilbur says kindly, turning to glance up the gangplank once more. At the top, Sally stands for a moment and on her hip, a little boy in fine clothes and a shock of red curls. “If he learns a single thing from you, I will flay you alive.”

“Duly noted!” Tommy chirps, and then holds his arms out as Sally carefully comes down, taking Wilbur’s extended hand to balance on the last few steps. Fundy stares at them all with wide eyes.

“Hello, Tommy,” Sally says with a wide grin. Tommy nods in return.

“Sally,” he says as Kristin draws him into a side hug. He hasn’t seen Fundy for a few months now, and he waves to him. Slowly, hesitantly, the baby waves back. “He’s big.”

“Getting bigger every day,” Sally says with a laugh. “He misses you.”

Tommy regards Fundy. “He’s a baby,” he says slowly.

“Doesn’t mean he can’t miss you.” Sally leans in, kissing his cheek and Tommy leans poke at Fundy’s cheek, too. The little boy giggles. “See?”

“Maybe,” Tommy admits begrudgingly.

“You’re his favorite uncle,” Sally promises him, brushing past after a moment to join Wilbur. Fundy’s big eyes watch him as they go, and Tommy grins at the baby for only a moment longer before properly greeting Kristin.

“Empress,” he says, and she laughs, rosy-cheeked. “I hope the ocean didn’t cross you while you were crossing it.”

“She was as gracious as ever,” Kristin says, smiling at him from her place beside him. “We are kindred spirits, you know.”

Oh, Tommy knows. He’d spent more than one summer with her on Cormorant Island, roaming the rocky beaches and cliff sides in order to stave off the boredom. She had been his companion those short summer months, and they had gotten to know one another better than they ever had before. Tommy thinks Kristin is one of the most lovely women he’s ever met—and definitely twice as chaotic as any woman he’s ever met.

“Since Tommy was gracious enough to meet us here, shall we all take the carriages up to the palace?” Phil asks. “Has anyone else arrived?”

“Not yet,” Tommy says. There will be a few more ships coming in with various nobles and diplomats alike. Ranboo and Tubbo will be arriving shortly as well, Caterwaul drawing a crowd for the spring festival. The royal family had made their way south at first snowmelt and caught a ship at the mouth of the Kirnach, braving the cold ocean seas to make their way south for the spring festival and to wait out the snowmelt in the north. Tommy has been spending his winters in Caterwaul and his summers in Raven’s Flight since he turned 21—after the festival, he plans on following them back up north. He finds himself missing the cliffs and mountains sometimes, just as he misses the sea and river.

It seems no matter where he goes, there is always something to long for.

But now, midmorning on a bright sunny day in Caterwaul, Tommy can't help but be utterly content.



“So,” Phil says as they watch the carriages be unloaded in the palace plaza. “How are things here?”

“Running smooth,” Tommy says, feeling himself swell with pride as he says it. Caterwaul has been flourishing these past few years, and while it's still Empire territory legally, the people are as nationalistic as ever.

Stewardship isn't kingship, but it's better than nothing. There's a lot of fucking paperwork.

“You're happy?” Phil asks, turning to look at him, and Tommy falters.

Don't get him wrong— he *is* happy, especially considering everything. His childhood stupidity hadn't left him suffering for life. He's lucky. Phil had been kind; perhaps too kind.

“You didn't have to let me live here,” Tommy says. Phil is watching him, and Tommy turns his head to gaze up at the intricate carvings that line the wall of the palace. Prime, her followers, mythical creatures and fish and sea life. It's pale yellow and the bricks lie even and perfectly, seamless in its construction. It's beautiful. “After everything.”

“I didn't,” Phil agrees.

“You could've sent me away.”

“I could've.”

“So why didn't you?” Tommy turns back to Phil, letting his hand fall from his face where he'd been blocking out the bright midday sun. Around them, people bustle in an ocean of activity, but he and Phil are an island of their own creation.

“You're an asset to me,” Phil says after a moment. “Anyone could see your natural charisma and talent for leadership. You're passionate. You're motivated. Leaving you to rot in a fort somewhere up north would be a waste. Killing you would've been a waste.”

Tommy... hadn't been expecting that answer.

But Phil continues, blatantly honest, “And you’ve done good work here, like I thought you would. You were just a kid, Tommy, and an angry one. But with a little encouragement and some real love, you’ve thrived. How could I pass up the opportunity to miss this? Miss watching you grow?”

“Fucking hell,” Tommy grunts. “You sound like you’re talking to Wilbur.”

“I’m being honest!” Phil says, laughing lightly. Tommy huffs out a breath, tucking his arms around himself in a way that is more petulant kid than steward of a city.

“I don’t know why I can’t just... accept this,” he says slowly. Frustration rises like the tide. “It’s been *so long* and it feels like everyone but me has moved on from things, like this guilt isn’t ever gonna go away.”

“I should hope not,” Phil says carefully. “You did a bad thing.” Before Tommy can turn to him upset, he continues, “And for the record, we haven’t moved on. No matter what some of us say.”

Tommy blinks at him, then looks back at the crowd, the palace that soars into the sky above them.

“Sometimes I feel like this isn’t real,” he says. “Like one wrong step and it gets ripped out from under me, like the war, like...” Dream’s name goes unspoken, but the weight of it is felt anyhow.

“Tommy,” Phil says gently. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“I can still feel it though,” Tommy points out, maybe a bit too harshly. “Like I’m standing on a wobbly canoe and could pitch right over the side.”

“Hey,” Phil says, sharp enough for Tommy to snap to attention and look over. He reaches out a hand, landing it on Tommy’s shoulder. “We wouldn’t let you go overboard,” he says next, and Tommy’s chest swells a bit.

“What happened to me being an asset?” he asks with a slightly choked tone. Phil just levels a *look* in his direction, using the hand he has on Tommy’s shoulder as an advantage to draw him into a hug. Phil’s never been a huge hugger on his own, really, and so for a moment Tommy is surprised. Then he relaxes, leaning his head against Phil’s.

“...you’ve gotten tall,” Phil says after a second, his voice muffled into Tommy’s neck.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “It happens. Taller than you, bitch.”

“Not Wil, though,” Phil comments airily, drawing back from the hug with a cheeky grin.

“Oooh, hold on!” A new voice joins their little moment, and Tommy turns, half ready to be annoyed, but Kristin’s smile is too wide to be mad at. “Is this a group hug? Can I join?”

“What made you think it was a group hug— oof!” Tommy grunts as he’s squished between the Emperor and the Empress, and the funny part is he’s taller than both of them. Kristin looks up



at him with a smile still painted across her face.

“How are you?” she asks. “Is Phil being annoying? I can tell him to lay off, if you need.” She bumps her hip against his, and Tommy grins.

“Yes actually,” he says, ignoring Phil’s protests from behind him. “He’s talking about taxes. And boring shit.”

“That is not true,” Phil starts, but Kristin interrupts him with a gasp.

“The first few days we are supposed to be on vacation,” she insists, hooking an arm through Tommy’s. He straightens his shoulders a bit as she reaches up and preens him, plucking some invisible piece of lint off of his shirt and then brushing off his shoulder. “Relaxing. I think you’ve forgotten the word, love.”

“I haven’t forgotten the word,” Phil says wearily. Kristin beams at him.

“Good,” she says. “In that case, I’m stealing Tommy for a moment. Go help your other son and grandson, Sally is busy.”

“Kris–”

“Go!”

After a long-winded look is thrown Tommy’s way, Phil finally turns to go. Kristin is grinning still, watching her husband head off across the pebbled stones and towards where Wilbur and Fundy are. Tommy watches him go too, and then catches Kristin watching him now out of the corner of his eye.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing,” she says. “I just love how you’ve grown up.”

“Oh, not you too,” Tommy groans, and she laughs like bells. She gives his arm a tug, spreading one arm out in front of them.

“Come on,” she says. “Vacation days. Show me some fun little secret in the palace or something, or give me a place to sit. I’m getting too old for long journeys– my feet hurt.”

“Haha,” Tommy teases, but starts heading up towards the palace anyways, Kristin still on his arm. “Old.”

“You make fun now, but wait ‘til it happens to you,” she says, poking him in the arm. “Prime hopes I never see the day.”

“You and me both,” Tommy grimaces, and that makes her laugh again.

Kristin sits down for all of two minutes before she's back on her feet again, whirling out of the room Tommy had shown her— a parlor meant for entertaining guests, but apparently their things hadn't been moved into the right wing and Kristin is determined to set it right. He lets her go, watching Wilbur file into the room with Phil just behind him, and a nanny trailing after them with Fundy. They settle into the room, Wilbur sitting on the couch, mildly chatting with both Tommy and playing with his son.

It's horribly domestic. Tommy feels so fucking content.

It doesn't last forever, of course. The nanny takes Fundy for a moment and Wilbur stretches an arm out, and then Phil is leaning over the back of the lounge and making a small hand movement. It draws both their attention, and he smiles, crow's feet gathering by the corners of his eyes.

"Wilbur," Phil says, gesturing again. "Can I speak with you?"

"Oh, sure," Wilbur says, pushing up from the couch. He flashes a grin at Tommy. "Watch Fundy?"

"Oh, right," Tommy rolls his eyes. "Of course."

"Oh, hush," Wilbur says, leaning down to ruffle Tommy's hair and press a kiss to his son's red hair. "Be right back." And with that, he and Phil disappear out into the hall.

Tommy stares at Fundy.

It's strange, trust.

Once upon a time, Wilbur had sat on the cold floor of the Great Hall and told Tommy in no uncertain terms he couldn't forgive him, but he was willing to try. Ten years and a few screaming matches later, and Wilbur has left Tommy in charge of his son and heir.

Fundy stares at Tommy. They both blink at each other, slowly. Fundy lifts his hand to his mouth and sticks his thumb in.

"Hi," Tommy says. Fundy just stares, unmoving, like a creepy doll. "So, uh. Do you... talk, yet?"

The toddler blinks at him again, and then looks towards the door where Wilbur had disappeared through. He tips his head, staring at it for a moment, and then shifts. With one hand still stuck in his mouth, Fundy pushes himself clumsily off the floor and onto two feet. Tommy watches carefully as he wobbles forward, then, gaining confidence, keeps going. He shuffles past Tommy (who immediately follows, he knows enough about toddlers to know letting them go unsupervised is a bad idea) and watches as the kid waddles over to the door. It's been shut behind the two royals— and Fundy reaches for the handle, making a frustrated noise when he can't reach.

"Big man," Tommy says kindly, stepping over to follow him and kneeling by the door. "It's okay. Wil will be back soon. Well— he's dad to you, huh?"

“Baba,” Fundy says through his hand, the sound slightly muffled.

“Yep, that’s... okay, that’s weird,” Tommy admits. “He’ll be right back. I promise.” And with that, he leans down and picks Fundy up.

It’s not the first time he’s held him. Tommy was there for a few months after he was born and he’d held him then too, just an infant and swaddled in all sorts of soft cloth. He was small then and he’s grown, heavy in Tommy’s arms as he balances the baby on his hip. A sturdy toddler for sure— he’s no longer the fragile child who Tommy had been terrified to hold for fear of dropping.

He’s not alone with Fundy either, even now. A nanny lingers just in case, sorting toys in the corner of the room. Tommy ignores her and shifts to the other side of the room, Fundy grabbing onto a strand of his hair and making him wince.

“Big guy,” Tommy grunts, trying to worm Fundy’s fingers out of his scalp. “That hurts.”

Fundy just giggles.

“Bitch,” Tommy says, but it’s fond. The kid is cute, and Tommy can see Wilbur in his nose and dark eyes, Sally in his mouth and shock of red hair.

“Mee,” Fundy says. He drags out the last vowel— “Mee. Meeee. Mee. Mee.”

“You?” Tommy asks. Fundy shakes his head and takes his hand out of his mouth in order to place both his hands on Tommy’s cheeks. He blows a raspberry.

“Meeeeee,” he says. Tommy raises a brow.

“Mate, you’re indecipherable.”

“Mee.” Something hits him then, and Tommy screws his face up.

“Are you trying to say Tommy?” he asks. Fundy burbles.

“Meee mee mee mee,” he says, bouncing in Tommy’s arms. The emotion he feels is instant and indescribable. A welling of affection and terror in his chest; affection, for this sweet child in his arms and terror, that he’ll fuck up their relationship before it even starts.

“Tommy,” he says carefully, placing emphasis on the *Tom* part. “It’s Tommy.”

“Ommeee,” Fundy says and Tommy feels that rush of emotion again, so strong it’s overwhelming.

“Close enough,” he chokes out.

“Are you guys looking out the window?” someone asks, and Tommy turns. Sally is in the doorway, a fond look in her eyes, and behind her is Wilbur, who trails into the room with a pale, distant look on his face. Tommy blinks as it turns contemplative, then fond when Wilbur lays eyes on his son.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “Where’d Phil go?”

“He had to deal with some paperwork,” Wilbur says a little too quickly. Tommy tips his head, but doesn’t comment.

“What was he asking you?” he asks, and Wilbur keeps his mouth shut as Sally comes over and coos over Fundy for a moment.

“Nothing important,” Wilbur says in a way that means it probably is. But he moves on before Tommy can ask. “How’s my little champion?”

“He said my name,” Tommy says, chest puffing out with pride. Wilbur’s eyes gleam.

“Did he?”

“He did! Say it again, Fundy– Tommy.”

“Ommmeeee.”

“See!”

“Aww.” Sally hums, and Fundy holds out his arms to her so she takes him, Tommy handing him over with little fuss. He was starting to get heavy anyway. “Do you love your uncle Tommy?” Fundy nods once and Tommy rolls his eyes to hide his flush, crossing the room to the couch and plopping down on it. He’s about to open his mouth and press Wilbur more, but before he can the door creaks open and a messenger enters. Tommy pauses, then nods.

“The Underscore-Beloveds have arrived,” they say, and Tommy grins.

“Have their things brought to the north room,” he instructs, “and escort them here. We’ll have dinner in a bit.”

“Right away.”

“Thank you,” Tommy says, and once they’re gone he turns back, still grinning.

“They docked awfully late,” Sally notes.

“Traffic is high this time of year,” Tommy explains. “Before the dry season. Fuck yeah, I’m so– oops. Heck yeah. Sorry. I’m just excited–”

“It’s fine,” Wilbur says, shrugging. Based on the way Sally glares at him and whaps him on the head (getting on her tiptoes to do so) it is not.

“I haven’t seen them since the wedding,” Wilbur says casually, ignoring his wife’s irate look and Fundy’s giggles. “Have you?”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “They’re... settling? I guess? Tubbo’s always doin’ something, but Ranboo likes the country, so–”

Speak of the devil. The door opens again and in comes a body, then two, one tall and the other short.

“Show me the baby,” Ranboo says as he sweeps into the room, sleeves trailing in the air as his eyes roam. They land on Fundy a moment later, and he gasps, long and loud.

“Prime,” Tubbo says. “He doesn’t get this excited when *I* enter a room.”

“That’s because I hate you,” Ranboo says primly, immediately reaching out to scoop Fundy up into his arms and cradle him. Sally laughs, leaning up to kiss his cheeks as Ranboo returns the favor. He turns, shooting Tubbo a look. “You’re not a baby.”

“Careful, please,” Wilbur says with a grimace.

“I won’t drop him,” Ranboo assures Wilbur gently. He bounces Fundy once, then twice. “I’ve been trying to convince Tubbo to adopt for ages.”

“Not until the house is finished,” Tubbo says, rolling his eyes and leaning against the wall. Tommy takes the moment to throw his arm around him, grinning as his friend mutters, “And then I’d *consider* it.”

“ow do?” he asks as Ranboo continues to coo, Wilbur relaxing onto the couch beside Sally as they oversee. Tubbo huffs.

“It’s too hot,” he complains. “I want to go home.”

“You’re such a crybaby,” Tommy grins, tightening his grip around Tubbo’s shoulders. “You can’t go home, not yet. Not until we go cause some trouble.”

“Trouble?” Tubbo asks, tipping his head to look up at Tommy. Then, his eyes glint. “Oh, shit, I have something for you!” Ignoring the calls of *language!* from Sally across the room, he digs into his pockets one after the other and then pulls out a small metal box. Tommy takes it carefully— it’s heavy, the sharp corners digging into his palm. He turns it over, noting the metal mesh on one side and an array of buttons on the skinnier sides.

“Oh, shit,” Tommy says. “You finished them?”

Tubbo just grins. He weasels his way out of Tommy’s grasp and turns around, pushing his way out of the door and disappearing into the hallway. Tommy hears his footsteps echo before they fade out, and then—

The box in his hand crackles to life.

“Hey, boss man,” Tubbo says, or, the box says. Tommy jumps. Tubbo’s voice is coming out of the mesh, but the boy himself is nowhere in sight. Tommy grins, holding the box up to his lips.

“Tubbo!” he cries. “You finished it!”

“Oh, no,” Ranboo says from across the room. “You have to— there’s a button on the side, third from the top—”

Tommy presses the button, and a screeching crackling noise blasts out from the speaker. Everyone in the room winces, and Fundy bursts out crying.

“Oh, look what you did,” Sally scolds, immediately standing up and snatching the baby away from Ranboo, bouncing him on her hip. “Shh, darling.”

“I didn’t mean to!” Tommy says, glaring across the room at Ranboo. “This is your fault.”

“You have to press the top button first,” Tubbo says, and his voice isn’t coming from the box anymore— Tommy turns as he maneuvers his way back into the room, giving Sally a slightly apologetic look as he takes the box from Tommy’s hand. He presses it, then gives it back. “I’ve improved them since last time. They can go across huge distances now. Across the city, even. Next I want to put a thing here—” he points to the top of the box, where it’s flat above the mesh, “—where you can see text and send it. Like letters, but real time.”

“Holy shit,” Tommy says. Sally has calmed Fundy down by now, but with his head tucked against her shoulder, she sighs.

“You should play music across those things,” she suggests lightly. “Give one to everyone in the city and have a concert that everyone can hear.”

Tubbo’s eyes light up. “Oh!” he says. “Actually, we’ve been working on something like that in the Underground! A household unit that interacts with a certain wavelength, we’ve started installing it around and doing daily broadcasts, so far it’s worked *wonderfully* . You should come visit and see.”

“We haven’t been there in a while,” Wilbur hums. “Music, Sal. That’s a good idea.”

“I’m a right genius,” Sally hums, and then leans to kiss the top of Wilbur’s head. “But I’m going to put Fundy down for a nap. By the time I get back, I expect a working music box for every house.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tubbo says with a grin, and Tommy swings open the door for her to leave with Fundy still in her arms.

“Tell them about the other thing,” Ranboo says cheerfully, plopping down on the couch opposite Wilbur.

“Other thing?” Tommy queries.

“Oh, yeah,” Tubbo says. “The guns.”

“What’s a gun?” Wilbur asks, tipping his head.

“It’s a new thing,” Tubbo says. “Someone started developing it in one of the workshops, and I sort of took a couple blueprints and ran. The talking boxes— I’ve been calling them comms for short, by the way. Since they’d be common use, and everyone speaks Common, and it’s

for communication. But. Whatever. If I'm honest, I think the whole firearm thing will be bigger than those."

"Firearm," Tommy says. "Does it light on fire?"

"No," Tubbo says. "Even better. It's a mixture of runes and gunpowder, and it fires a projectile at incredible distances. It's brilliant. At the moment we've been testing them using small metal pellets, but with the right mix of magic and firepower, they could be proper powerful."

"Don't make me nervous," Wilbur laughs, and Tommy rolls his eyes. "What? It's a valid fear. The Vaults get a taste of firepower and decide to steamroll us in one day. Possible, if they have exploding— what did you call them? Guns?"

"Guns," Tubbo confirms. "Speaking of steamrolling though, I like the designs for the bridges here. When were they put in?"

Tommy shrugs. "I dunno. Couple years back?"

Tubbo nods. "Incredible design. I like the steam processors. We use something similar for the autogears that lift wagons and cargo up and out of the Underground."

"Did I tell you about the mills?" Wilbur asks, cupping his chin in hand. "We've started implementing that mechanism the Vaults sent us."

"Oh, is it working?" Tubbo asks. Wilbur nods.

"You're all a bunch of fucking nerds," Tommy declares loudly. Ranboo snorts laughter into his fingers, and Tubbo shoots him a glare.

"Nerds who make *history*," he says snootily. Tommy swats him on the shoulder. "What! Don't you want to make history?"

"I've had enough history in my life," Tommy says, turning his nose up. "Isn't that right, Ranboo? Reading history is boring. Making history is painful."

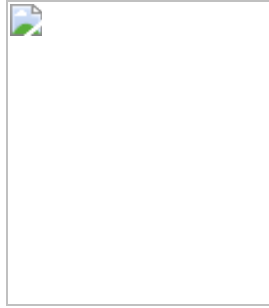
"Oh, yeah," Ranboo says. "Hey, I was the first council member to get kicked off the council in four hundred years. I am done making history."

"The only sane man in the room," Tommy says firmly, nodding his head. Tubbo just rolls his eyes, and Wilbur just smiles quietly. Tommy eyes him— something's off, he's been quiet, but he'll press about it later when Tubbo and Ranboo aren't around. Wilbur glances over as Tommy is looking at him and their eyes meet. Tommy tips his head. Wilbur just blinks. Yeah, he'll ask about it later.

For now, he leans back into the couch cushions and listens as Ranboo and Tubbo start to detail the specifics of their new manor they had commissioned, bickering over the design choices and details. Ranboo points out how empty it feels. Tubbo staunchly refuses to approach the topic of kids. Sally returns and tucks herself into Wilbur's side, resting her head

on his shoulder and smiling as she offers her opinions on the wall trim or whatever weird shit they care about.

Fucking married people.



They are supposed to be having dinner.

Instead, Tommy is wandering the halls, looking for Wilbur.

Not as uncommon as one might think— Wilbur is a musician, an artist through and through, and he wanders off more than he should, lost in his own mind and scribbling down various chords and notes and lyrics onto any paper he can find. He's an introspective guy, more introverted than many people think, and quieter, too. The Crown Prince may have been born with emeralds on his tongue, silver pouring from his nose and ears and eyes, but he's Wilbur too, not just a title. Tommy has gotten to know that Wilbur very well, despite thinking he had ruined all his chances.

He likes that Wilbur better. Not the Crown Prince— he likes Wilbur. He likes playing piano while Wilbur strums the guitar and they make silly improv songs together. He likes reading out loud while Wilbur composes, or just being in the same room as him. They squabble, sure (one memorable moment of being pushed down the *fucking stairs* come to mind) but Tommy likes to think he knows Wilbur.

Which is why he's the one looking for him now, since they're both late to dinner.

He has a hunch. The royal family has been to Caterwaul's palace before, spent some time here, and they know the layout fairly well. Not as well as Tommy, but well.

He's not surprised when he finds him eventually, perched on one of the library windows, the one that gets just the right amount of sunshine and has a small green pad on the sill so you can sit and soak it in. Wilbur is sitting there, feet drawn up and knees bent, staring out across the horizon.

"You're late," Tommy says. Wilbur doesn't startle, doesn't even look at him. Tommy steps up to the window and crosses his arms.

"Do you see that?" Wilbur asks. Tommy blinks, then squints outside.

"What?" he asks. "The sunset?"



“Yeah,” Wilbur says. “There’s supposed to be this strange phenomenon, sometimes. A green flash. Momentary, fleeting. The sun crosses the horizon and the edge of it goes intensely green. Scientists don’t know what it is. An old legend says it’s the sun’s jealous flush, as the stars get to join the moon and she doesn’t.”

“Sounds dumb,” Tommy says, staring out across the rooftops. “Why are you looking for it?”

“Thought it might be interesting,” Wilbur says. He draws his legs to the side, and after a second Tommy joins him on the sill. The cushion is plush under his hands and legs, sinking with his weight. They sit.

“You’re late,” Tommy begins again.

“For dinner, yes, I know,” Wilbur sighs. “Please, Tommy.”

“Well, *so-rry*,” Tommy says emphatically. “Not my fault I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“I’m a growing boy.”

“You’re twenty-five,” Wilbur says, amused, and Tommy grins.

“So?” he asks. “You like, thirty. You don’t get to say shit, old man. Balding. You’re balding. Bald. Baldbur.”

“Prime,” Wilbur groans, tipping his head back. “Okay, one, I’m twenty-nine. Two, shut up. Three, see number two.”

“You’ve got a kid,” Tommy says fiercely. “I think I can tease you about being old.”

“Insult my hairline again and I will never forgive you,” Wilbur says, jutting his chin up and still looking out the window. Tommy goes quiet, and they both sit there, watching as the sun creeps closer and closer to the horizon, leaving dark spots in Tommy’s vision as he looks at it and then looks away in turn. Wilbur is quiet as well, and after a minute or so, Tommy gathers his courage.

“Can I be honest?” he asks quietly. Wilbur nods. “I never thought you *would* forgive me.”

Wilbur hums. He doesn’t have to ask what Tommy’s talking about– he knows. “At first,” he says. “Neither did I.”

The silence that falls over them is tinged with both terror and relief. Tommy swallows.

“Why did you?” he asks.

The day Wilbur had started forgiving him hadn’t been different than any other day. He’d woken up and done his duties, quiet and pensive (as he often was in the days after the failed coup). It had been months since the pinnacle of the conflict, and Tommy had settled into

routine by then. Wilbur hadn't spoken a word to him since, but they'd coexisted mostly peacefully.

That morning, Wilbur had turned to Tommy over the breakfast table and asked him to pass the jam.

It was like the first crack in an unsteady foundation. After that, Wilbur spoke to him more and more. The trust wasn't there, but he at least stopped pretending Tommy was invisible. It had been out of the blue and so sudden that it had thrown him for a loop, and even now he's yet to ask why.

Wilbur sits there, the sun on his face and painting molasses into his hair, and hums.

"I was tired of being angry," he says. "It's very exhausting."

"Yeah," Tommy says. "It is." He'd been so tired, all the time, back when they'd planned the coup.

"I knew I couldn't be angry at you forever," Wilbur says, shrugging. "You were a part of my life and I was a part of yours. My father had forgiven you the moment he killed your advisor. My mother when she learned the truth. I needed time to process." Wilbur looks over at him, and Tommy swims in the color of his eyes. "I still don't forgive you, you know."

"I know," Tommy says. "But you're civil."

"Well, I have to be," Wilbur huffs, rolling his eyes.

"That's what brothers do, innit?" Tommy asks with a slow-creeping grin, and Wilbur reaches out to shove at his shoulder and laughs quietly.

"Don't say that," he says through the chuckles, "I'll cry."

"It's true though," Tommy points out. Wilbur just shakes his head, turning it back into the sunset and squinting across the golden rooftops. Tommy watches him, watches his face twist. He shuts his eyes, and Tommy waits.

"Dad wants to abdicate," Wilbur says after a second.

"Oh," Tommy says. And then: "Oh *shit*, Wil."

Wilbur laughs humorlessly. "Yeah."

"Did he say when?"

"In the next year."

"Are you— are you ready?"

"I like to think I am." Wilbur's shoulders go up, and then down. "I have an heir already and Sally wants *more*, Prime bless her. She's insane."

“She’d be queen,” Tommy says slowly.

“Yeah, and she’ll be a damn good one.” Wilbur nods sharply once. “I told him whenever he was ready to step back, I’d step up.”

“Does Sally know? Techno?” Tommy asks.

“No,” Wilbur says. He turns to look at Tommy again, eyes blazing. “You’re the first I’ve told.”

“Wilbur,” Tommy says, feeling his nose scrunch up. He thinks for a second, tasting the words on his tongue. “I think you’d be a right fuckin’ good emperor.”

“Thanks, Tommy,” Wilbur says with a soft smile.

“And I’ll be right there if you need me,” Tommy continues, bringing an arm up to thump his chest with one fist. “Supportive and shit.”

“You just want to keep your title here,” Wilbur teases, and Tommy considers shoving him off the roof but decides against it in the end, just elbowing him gently. “Ow!”

“I was trying to be sentimental,” Tommy whines, and Wilbur snickers loudly.

“Well, if we’re being sentimental...” he drawls, and Tommy shoves his hands into his face.

“Wil, please,” he pleads. Wilbur just laughs, and warm hands encircle his wrists, drawing his fingers away from his cheeks and forcing Tommy to look at him. He does, albeit with a glare.

“I am of the personal conviction,” Wilbur begins, “that no matter the lifetime, no matter the universe— you would always find some way to bother me. And I would have it no other way. You are my favorite brother.”

“Bitch,” Tommy says. Then, “I’m happy you’re going to be emperor. I think you’ll be the best this Continent’s ever seen.”

“Don’t be too ridiculous,” Wilbur scoffs, letting go of his hands. Tommy lets them settle in his lap with a wide grin.

“Oh no, I’m serious,” he says, shifting so he can lean their shoulders together and elbow him slightly in the ribs. “They’ll sing your praises for centuries to come. Loudly. With their chests. I’ll make sure the royal bard adds some nasty cusses in there so they know which ones were your favorites, too.”

“Insufferable child,” Wilbur snarks back. “I’ll make it so they never forget how loud you snore.”

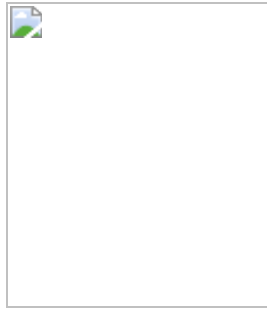
“You chew with your mouth open!”

“You’re a klutz.”

“I’m graceful, thank you. Like a deer. *You’re* a proper dickhead.”

“You—”

Neither of them see the sun cross the horizon, the way it flashes green.



Tommy is halfway back to his room before he has to stop for a moment.

He has a bit of a headache, alright? It’s normal. Or at least, Wilbur tells him it’s normal. Something about tannins in the grape skin that make it into the drink and make it bitter, something something science, something something vineyards, Tommy doesn’t care. All he cares about is making the headache go away, so he takes a moment to press his head against the cool stone of the palace walls and hum to himself. It’s dark out now, the sun having set hours ago, but they’d all stayed up fairly late just chatting and catching up. Tommy had excused himself after the headache had come on, and he’s not expecting anyone to follow him, really.

“Prime,” someone says behind him, and Tommy groans. “I always forget how cold it gets at night here.”

“It can’t be warm all the time,” Tommy says, turning away from the wall in order to glare at Technoblade. “It wouldn’t be fair.”

“To who?” Techno asks, raising a brow.

“The weathermen,” Tommy says with no small amount of exasperation, which Technoblade seems to find incredibly amusing due to how he bursts out laughing. The sound bounces off the stone and makes Tommy’s headache a bit worse and he winces, which shuts the older man right up.

“Are you alright?” he asks, stepping forward. Tommy nods.

“Wil said it would go away,” he relays, and Techno just rolls his eyes.

“He would know,” he mutters, holding out an arm. Tommy eyes it.

“I’m not a girl,” he says loftily. “I didn’t even have that much to drink. I’m not a klutz either, whatever that means. Or *lanky*. Wilbur keeps calling me lanky. Am I lanky, Techno?”

“You are...” Techno sighs, and then throws his hand out in aggravation, clearly unsure of what to say. “Proportionate.”

“You’re regretting coming after me, aren’t you?” Tommy says gleefully, and Techno just reaches out and pats his shoulder awkwardly.

“Come on, kid,” he says. “Time for bed.”

“Aww,” Tommy coos, “you care!”

“Unfortunately,” Techno grits out, nudging him with one hand down the hall. Tommy goes, if only to make him shut up for a second and let some peace and quiet settle in his head once more. Wilbur had been right— his headache is already kind of fading, but he keeps up appearances just so Techno doesn’t deem the cause unworthy and leave. They make their way down the hall, step after step, the cool night breeze coming in through the windows.

“I understand,” Techno says suddenly, and Tommy nearly jumps.

“Understand?” he asks.

“Why you loved it here,” he continues. “And still do. It is a beautiful home.”

“It is,” Tommy says with a nod that makes his vision wobble.

“I think I get it now,” Techno admits. Tommy looks over at him, the pinched look on his face, the graying hairs on his temple and chin. He looks worn, battle-hardened and gruff. But when he looks at Tommy, there’s that spark of fondness he’s now so used to seeing. “You.”

“Me? Of course you get me, I’m great.”

That makes Techno huff a laugh. “Sure.”

“I am,” Tommy says, pounding a fist against his chest. “Biggest man.”

“You are,” Techno concedes. “But don’t let anyone know I said it.”

Tommy hadn’t accepted Techno’s arm earlier, but now he leans over and presses his head against the older man’s shoulder, feeling him tense up slightly and then relax. They keep walking like that, slowly, the lanterns casting long shadows and curtains fluttering. They’re almost to Tommy’s room.

“I know you don’t like hugs,” Tommy mutters, not really sure why he’s talking so quietly but he is, “but I’d press the hug button on you right now, if you had one.”

“I don’t,” Techno says fondly. “Sorry.”

“Hug button.”

“Nope.”

“Hug.”

“Sorry, kid.”

“You’re the worst,” Tommy groans, lifting his head from Techno’s shoulder to squint in displeasure at him. His head pounds for a second, and he just stands there, Techno supporting him with a shoulder and hand. He’s smiling, strangely. Technoblade isn’t one to smile at just anything, so Tommy squints harder at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” Techno says. Then, “I’m glad I didn’t kill you.”

“When?” Tommy asks. There have been many points in the past where he thought it was possible.

“The very first time,” Techno tells him. “Here.”

“Ah.” Tommy’s mind curls in displeasure at that memory, however fuzzy it may be. He suspects some bits of it are blocked out, but he can remember the hatred he’d felt standing on his ruined dais without a crown, staring down the Emperor and General. That had been a bad day. He can hardly remember what Techno had said, only knowing that Phil had been the one to curb his violence. “Yeah, thanks for that.”

“I mean it,” Techno says. He’s still smiling a little bit, and it’s weird. Techno’s face isn’t supposed to look like that. It’s supposed to be harsh angles and commanding looks, softness in his eyes and scruff on his chin, kind but determined— “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” Tommy says, scowling at him absently. He’s tired. He’s very tired and his headache has returned, and ignoring Techno’s fond little look he turns toward his door, which has suddenly appeared in the wall. His bed is waiting for him on the other side, and he gratefully reaches for the handle. Then pauses, and turns. “Goodnight, General.”

“Goodnight, pup.”

And Tommy stumbles into his room, a hand pressed to his forehead, a sunset in his stomach.



He wakes headache-less, bright sun pouring in, movement by the door as a maid heads out from leaving a pot of tea by the desk. Tommy blinks into awareness and hums to himself, flopping over in his cushions before stretching, curling his toes and fingers until his legs start to cramp and he’s satisfied. There’s still a buzz lingering under his skin from yesterday, the aftereffects of a day spent socializing and fucking around with the people he loves most in the world.

He’d dreamed about days like this, when he was a kid. Responsibilities, but not too many. A family who loves him unconditionally.

...he hadn't exactly expected the family to be the Empire's ruling monarchy, but hey, he'll take what he can get these days.

Slowly, Tommy crawls out of bed. He knows Phil and Kristin are early risers, but they're technically on a short vacation for a day or two while everybody else catches up. Techno always sleeps in, and he has no idea about Wilbur or Sally. He's got some time to himself, he reckons, sitting on the edge of his bed and fighting off a yawn. Across the room, light hits the steam coming off the tea, curling and dancing in the air above the pot. Tommy watches it for a minute or so, and then looks down at his feet, at the rug underneath them.

He pauses, and then shifts. Moves so he's sliding off the bed as something comes to him, thoughts unbidden in this early morning hour. There are birds chirping outside, leaves rustling, a city waking up.

Tommy pauses on the precipice of movement and stillness, half-kneeling by the side of his bed as he stares at the shapeless colorful carpet that travels underneath.

When he'd arrived back in Caterwaul, two months after his eighteenth birthday, the treasury had been raided and assimilated into the Empire's coffers. The palace had been broken into a few times, a few paintings and statues stolen, but it had been intact.

Tommy's room had also been intact. And it had been there, sitting on his desk in a box covered with a thick layer of dust, that Tommy had found his crown.

Thick golden band, jewels of red and green dotting the hand-crafted circle that extend upwards into prongs, more red jewels and intricate metal work that depicts tiny bundles of grain. He'd had a matching brooch at one point. It was heavy, coated in its own fine layer of dust, but once that was wiped away it gleamed like new. Tommy had stood there with it in his hands for a long time.

Now, he moves once more. He kneels at the side of his bed and squeezes his shoulders under it, reaching with long arms to scrabble at the sides of that same box and pull it out from under. It settles in his lap with imposing weight, and after a second Tommy opens the lid. He's done this a hundred times, but it's novel even so. The metal gleams at him and he takes it out of the box gently.

Not much of his royal finery had survived. This is all he has left, a crown abandoned in his bedroom in a rush when trying to defend a palace. Tommy can't remember leaving it here in a dingy box, but he'd found it that way and nothing else in his room had been touched so he must've been the one who left it.

When he was younger, the crown had been too big. It had tilted on his head and pressed his curly hair flat, sinking down to his brows. Now, when he lifts it to his head, it's far too small. It perches on the top of his skull and sits awkwardly, like it doesn't belong.

He's not sure why he kept it. As a reminder? As the physical representation of his failure? Or maybe just nostalgia, plain and simple. He could've had it smelted down and distributed for the good of his people, and yet he's kept it. Selfish, even all these years later.

But he can't get rid of it; he refuses to, keeps it hidden away in a nondescript box under his bed. Some part of him clings to his kingship. Tommy knows he'll never get it back, and he's okay with that now. He's made his peace.

In the gold reflection, his face warps. He turns it over in his hands, watching the sunlight refract off the jewels and then turns his head to look out his row of windows, wide open and letting in a soft salty breeze. He can hear the sounds of the city below, the creaking of ship boards and bustling ambiance.

Something makes him rise to his feet. He pads over to the windows and stops at the sill of one, glancing down into the small patch of gardens between the wall and his bedroom. Then beyond that, the larger ones between the inner and outer walls. Tommy looks down at the heavy crown in his hands, judges the distance with a critical eye, and then hefts it over his shoulder and throws.

One glittering arc later, it lands clear across the wall with a soft *thump*. Tommy loses sight of it in the plant life, and resolutely grasps the window pane with one hand as he nods to himself once, sharply. Some lucky gardener will find it, he reckons, maybe sell it. Or it'll remain hidden in the weeds for years and years, intertwined with the land and roots and laying there for centuries before being dug up by a lucky farmer, years after this city has fallen to ruin.

Whatever the outcome may be, Tommy thinks it'll be better than just lying in the liminal space under his bed, a reminder of all that's been lost.

With one last glance out the window, Tommy turns away.

## Chapter End Notes

.... it's Over Over. done. DONE!

not even a year after the first brainrot session me and my friends had for this AU, and it's done. it's come a long way and there was a lot that wasn't even put into it.... but it still came out pretty perfect :) i'm glad we could spend this time together, and i'm glad i could give you an ending.

thank you so much for reading (again)

also, if you want a physical copy i'm fine with that, but i will be releasing a formatted version that i'm making for myself with all the art and stuff so!! maybe wait and go follow my twitter for when i announce that!!

-

ART FOR THIS CHAPTER WAS MADE BY MY WONDERFUL FRIENDS  
[CROW](#) AND [MADS](#)!



official cataclysm playlist: [here!](#)

if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :)

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

## End Notes

will update every friday at 12pm est.

Works inspired by this one

[Courage, don't desert me](#) by [AliveAndRestless](#)

[Cataclysm Drabbles from the Discord](#) by [mosaicofdreamsanddragons](#)

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